LIBRARY OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

823
Sp32u
v.1

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

http://www.archive.org/details/underlockkeystor01spei

UNDER LOCK AND KEY.

VOL. I.

UNDER LOCK AND KEY.

A Story.

BY

T. W. SPEIGHT,

AUTHOR OF "BROUGHT TO LIGHT," "FOOLISH MARGARET," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 18, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND.

1869.

[*All rights of Translation and Reproduction are reserved.*]

LONDON:
SAVILL, EDWARDS AND CO., PRINTERS, CHANDOS STREET,
COVENT GARDEN.

3 V
Q

823
Sp32w
v.1

IN justice to himself the author thinks it requisite to state that the entire plan of this story was sketched out, and several of the chapters written, before the first lines of Mr. Wilkie Collins's "Moonstone" had been given to the Public.

He has further denied himself the pleasure of reading "The Moonstone" till after the completion of his own story, so as to preclude any possible charge of having derived the outline of his plot from the work of another writer.

LONDON, *February*, 1869.

CONTENTS

OF

THE FIRST VOLUME.

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	MY ARRIVAL AT DUPLEY WALLS	1
II.	THE MISTRESS OF DUPLEY WALLS	18
III.	A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY	36
IV.	SCARSDALE WEIR	50
V.	AT ROSE COTTAGE	70
VI.	THE GROWTH OF A MYSTERY	86
VII.	EXIT JANET HOLME	104
VIII.	BY THE SCOTCH EXPRESS	119
IX.	AT THE "GOLDEN GRIFFIN"	137
X.	THE STOLEN MANUSCRIPT	150
XI.	BON REPOS	169
XII.	THE AMSTERDAM EDITION OF 1698	185

CHAP. PAGE

XIII. M. PLATZOFF'S SECRET—CAPTAIN DUCIE'S TRANSLATION OF M. PAUL PLATZOFF'S MS. 200

XIV. DRASHKIL-SMOKING 207

XV. THE DIAMOND 227

XVI. JANET'S RETURN 250

XVII. DUPLEY WALLS AFTER SEVEN YEARS . . 263

UNDER LOCK AND KEY.

CHAPTER I.

MY ARRIVAL AT DUPLEY WALLS.

"Miss Janet Holme,
To the care of Lady Pollexfen,
Dupley Walls, near Tydsbury,
Midlandshire."

"There, miss, I'm sure that will do famously," said Chirper, the overworked oldish young person whose duty it was to attend to the innumerable wants of the young-lady boarders of Park Hill Seminary. She had just written out, in a large sprawling hand, a card as above, which card was presently to be nailed on to the one small box that held the whole of my worldly belongings.

"And I think, miss," added Chirper, meditatively, as she held out the card at arm's length

and gazed at it admiringly, "that if I was to write out another card similar, and tie it round your arm, it would mayhap help you in getting safe to your journey's end."

I, a girl of twelve, was the Janet Holme indicated above, and I had been looking over Chirper's shoulder with wondering eyes while she addressed the card. "But who is Lady Pollexfen, and where is Dupley Walls? and what have I to do with either, Chirper, please?" I asked.

"If there is one thing in little girls more hateful than another, it is curiosity," answered Chirper, with her mouth half full of nails. "Curiosity has been the bane of many of our sex. Witness Bluebeard's unhappy wife. If you want to know more, you must ask Mrs. Whitehead. I have my instructions, and I acts on them."

Meeting Mrs. Whitehead half an hour later as she was coming down the stone corridor that led from the refectory, I did ask that lady precisely the same questions that I had put to Chirper. Her frosty glance, filled with a cold surprise, smote me even through her spectacles, and I shrank a little, abashed at my own boldness.

"The habit of asking questions elsewhere than in the class-room should not be encouraged in young ladies," said Mrs. Whitehead, with a sort of prim severity. "The other young ladies are gone home; you are about to follow their example."

"But, Mrs. Whitehead—Madam," I pleaded, "I never had any other home than Park Hill."

"More questioning, Miss Holme? Fie! Fie!" And with a lean forefinger uplifted in menacing reproval, Mrs. Whitehead sailed on her way, nor deigned me another word.

I stole out into the playground, wondering, wretched, and yet smitten through with faint delicious thrillings of a new-found happiness such as I had often dreamed of, but had scarcely dared hope ever to realize. I, Janet Holme, going home! It was almost too incredible for belief. I wandered about like one mazed—like one who stepping suddenly out of darkness into sunshine is dazzled by an intolerable brightness whichever way he turns his eyes. And yet I was wretched: for was not Miss Chinfeather dead? And that, too, was a fact almost too incredible for belief.

As I wandered, this autumn morning, up and down the solitary playground, I went back in memory as far as memory would carry me, but only to find that Miss Chinfeather and Park Hill Seminary blocked up the way. Beyond them lay darkness and mystery. Any events in my child's life that might have happened before my arrival at Park Hill had for me no authentic existence. I had been part and parcel of Miss Chinfeather and the Seminary for so long a time that I could not dissociate myself from them even in thought. Other pupils had had holidays, and letters, and presents, and dear ones at home of whom they often talked; but for me there had been none of these things. I knew that I had been placed at Park Hill when a very little girl by some, to me, mysterious and unknown person, but further than that I knew nothing. The mistress of Park Hill had not treated me in any way differently from her other pupils; but had not the bills contracted on my account been punctullay paid by somebody, I am afraid that the even-handed justice on which she prided herself — which, in conjunction with her aquiline

nose and a certain antique severity of deportment, caused her to be known among us girls as *The Roman Matron*—would have been somewhat ruffled, and that sentence of expulsion from those classic walls would have been promptly pronounced and as promptly carried into effect.

Happily no such necessity had ever arisen; and now the Roman Matron lay dead in the little corner room on the second floor, and had done with pupils, and half-yearly accounts, and antique deportment, for ever.

In losing Miss Chinfeather I felt as though the corner-stone of my life had been rent away. She was too cold, she was altogether too far removed for me to regard her with love, or even with that modified feeling which we call affection. But then no such demonstration was looked for by Miss Chinfeather. It was a weakness above which she rose superior. But if my child's love was a gift which she would have despised, she looked for and claimed my obedience—the resignation of my will to hers, the absorption of my individuality in her own, the gradual elimination from my life of all its colour and freshness. She

strove earnestly, and with infinite patience, to change me from a dreamy, passionate child—a child full of strange wild moods, capricious, and yet easily touched either to laughter or tears—into a prim and elegant young lady, colourless and formal, and of the most orthodox boarding-school pattern; and if she did not quite succeed in the attempt, the fault, such as it was, must be set down to my obstinate disposition and not to any lack of effort on the part of Miss Chinfeather. And now this powerful influence had vanished from my life, from the world itself, as swiftly and silently as a snowflake in the sun. The grasp of the hard but not unkindly hand, that had held me so firmly in the narrow groove in which it wished me to move, had been suddenly relaxed, and everything around me seemed tottering to its fall. Three nights ago Miss Chinfeather had retired to rest, as well, to all appearance, and as cheerful as ever she had been; next morning she had been found dead in bed. This was what they told us pupils; but so great was the awe in which I held the mistress of Park Hill Seminary that I could not conceive of Death even as ven-

turing to behave disrespectfully towards her. I pictured him in my girlish fancy as knocking at her chamber door in the middle of the night, and after apologizing for the interruption, asking whether she was ready to accompany him. Then would she who was thus addressed arise, and wrap an ample robe about her, and place her hand with solemn sweetness in that of the Great Captain, and the two would pass out together into the starlit night, and Miss Chinfeather would be seen of mortal eyes nevermore.

Such was the picture that had haunted my brain for two days and as many nights, while I wandered forlorn through house and playground or lay awake on my little bed. I had said farewell to one pupil after another till all were gone, and the riddle which I had been putting to myself continually for the last forty-eight hours had now been solved for me by Mrs. Whitehead, and I had been told that I too was going home.

"To the care of Lady Pollexfen, Dupley Walls, Midlandshire." The words repeated themselves again and again in my brain, and became a greater puzzle with every repetition. I

had never to my knowledge heard of either the person or the place. I knew nothing of one or the other. I only knew that my heart thrilled strangely at the mention of the word *Home;* that unbidden tears started to my eyes at the thought that perhaps—only perhaps—in that as yet unknown place there might be some one who would love me just a little. "Father—Mother." I spoke the words, but they sounded unreal to me, and as if uttered by another. I spoke them again, holding out my arms, and crying aloud. All my heart seemed to go out in the cry, but only the hollow winds answered me as they piped mournfully through the yellowing leaves, a throng of which went rustling down the walk as though stirred by the footsteps of a ghost. Then my eyes grew blind with tears, and I wept silently for a time as if my heart would break.

But tears were a forbidden luxury at Park Hill, and when, a little later on, I heard Chirper calling me by name, I made haste to dry my eyes and compose my features. She scanned me narrowly as I ran up to her. "You dear, soft-hearted little thing!" she said. And with

that she stooped suddenly and gave me a hearty kiss that might have been heard a dozen yards away. I was about to fling my arms round her neck, but she stopped me, saying, "That will do, dear. Mrs. Whitehead is waiting for us at the door."

Mrs. Whitehead was watching us through the glass door which led into the playground. "The coach will be here in half an hour, Miss Holme," she said; "so that you have not much time for your preparations."

I stood like one stunned for a moment or two. Then I said, "If you please, Mrs. Whitehead, may I see Miss Chinfeather before I go?"

Her thin, straight lips quivered slightly, but in her eyes I read only cold disapproval of my request. "Really," she said, "what a singular child you must be. I scarcely know what to say."

"Oh, if you please, Mrs. Whitehead!" I urged. "Miss Chinfeather was always kind to me. I remember her as long as I can remember anything. To see her once more—for the last time. It would seem to me cruel to go away without."

"Follow me," she said, almost in a whisper. So I followed her softly upstairs into the little corner room where Miss Chinfeather lay in white and solemn state, grandly indifferent to all mundane matters. As I gazed, it seemed but an hour ago since I had heard those still lips conjugating the verb *mourir* for the behoof of poor ignorant me, and the words came back to me, and I could not help repeating them to myself as I looked: *Je meurs, tu meurs,* &c.

I bent over and kissed the marble-cold forehead, and said farewell in my heart, and went downstairs without a word.

Half an hour later the district coach, a splendid vision, pulled up impetuously at the gates. I was ready to the moment. Mrs. Whitehead's frosty fingers touched mine for an instant; she imprinted a chill kiss on my cheek, and looked relieved. Good-bye, my dear Miss Holme, and God bless you," she said. "Strive to bear in mind through after life the lessons that have been instilled into you at Park Hill Seminary. Present my respectful compliments to Lady Pollexfen, and do not forget your catechism."

At this point the guard sounded an impatient summons on his bugle; Chirper picked up my box, seized me by the hand, and hurried with me to the coach. My luggage found a place on the roof; I was unceremoniously bundled inside; Chirper gave me another of her hearty kisses, and pressed a crooked sixpence into my hand "for luck," as she whispered. I am sure there was a real tear in her eye as she did so. Next moment we were off.

I kept my eyes fixed on the Seminary as long as it remained in view, especially on the little corner room. It seemed to me that I must be a very wicked girl indeed, because I felt no real sorrow at quitting the place that had been my home for so many years. I could not feel anything but secretly glad, but furtively happy with a happiness which I felt ashamed of acknowledging even to myself. Miss Chinfeather's white and solemn face, as seen in her coffin, haunted my memory, but even of her I thought only with a sort of chastened regret. She had never touched my heart. There had been about her a bleakness of nature that effectually chilled any

tender buds of liking or affection that might in the ordinary course of events have grown up and blossomed round her life. Therefore, in my child's heart there was no lasting sorrow for her death, no gracious memories of her that would stay with me, and smell sweet, long after she herself should be dust.

My eight miles' ride by coach was soon over. It ended at the railway station of the county town. The guard of the coach had, I suppose, received his secret instructions. Almost before I knew what had happened, I found myself in a first-class carriage, with a ticket for Tydsbury in my hand, and committed to the care of another guard, he of the railway, this time—a fiery-faced man, with immense red whiskers, who came and surveyed me as though I were some contraband article, but finished by nodding his head and saying with a smile, "I dessay we shall be good friends, miss, before we get to the end of our journey."

It was my first journey by rail, and the novelty of it filled me with wonder and delight. The train by which I travelled was a fast one,

and after my first feeling of fright at the rapidity of the motion had merged into one of intense pleasure and exhilaration of mind, I could afford to look back on my recent coach experience with a sort of pitying superiority, as on a something that was altogether *rococo* and out of date. Already the rush of new ideas into my mind was so powerful that the old landmarks of my life seemed in danger of being swept clean away. Already it seemed days instead of only a brief hour or two since I had bidden Mrs. Whitehead farewell, and had taken my last look at Park Hill Seminary.

The red-faced guard was as good as his word; he and I became famous friends before I reached the end of my journey. At every station at which we stopped he came to the window to see how I was getting on, and whether I was in want of anything, and was altogether so kind to me that I was quite sorry to part from him when the train reached Tydsbury, and left me, a minute later, standing, a solitary waif, on the little platform.

The one solitary fly of which the station could

boast was laid under contribution. My little box was tossed on to its roof; I myself was shut up inside; the word was given, "To Dupley Walls;" the station was left behind, and away we went, jolting and rumbling along the quiet country lanes, and under overarching trees, all aglow just now with autumn's swift-fading beauty. The afternoon was closing in, and the wind was rising, sweeping up with melancholy soughs from the dim wooded hollows where it had lain asleep till the sun went down; garnering up the fallen leaves like a cunning miser, wherever it could find a hiding-place for them, and then dying suddenly down, and seeming to hold its breath as if listening for the footsteps of the coming winter.

In the western sky hung a huge tumbled wrack of molten cloud like the ruins of some vast temple of the gods of eld. Chasmed buttresses, battlements overthrown; on the horizon a press of giants, shoulder against shoulder, climbing slowly to the rescue; in mid-sky a praying woman; farther afield a huge head, and a severed arm the fingers of which were clenched in

menace: all these things I saw, and a score others, as the clouds changed from minute to minute in form and brightness, while the stars began to glow out like clusters of silver lilies in the eastern sky.

We kept jolting on for so long a time through the twilight lanes, and the evening darkened so rapidly, that I began to grow frightened. It was like being lifted out of a dungeon, when the old fly drew up with a jerk, and a shout of "House there!" and when I looked out and saw that we were close to the lodge entrance of some park.

Presently a woman, with a child in her arms, came out of the lodge and proceeded to open the gate for us. Said the driver—"How's Tootlums to-night?"

The woman shouted something in reply, but I don't think the old fellow heard her.

"Ay, ay," he called out, "Tootlums will be a famous young shaver one of these days," and with that he whipped up his horse, and away we went.

The drive up the avenue, for such at the time

I judged it to be, and such it proved to be, did not occupy many minutes. The fly came to a stand, and the driver got down and opened the door. "Now, young lady, here you are," he said, and I found myself in front of the main entrance to Dupley Walls.

It was too dark by this time for me to discern more than the merest outline of the place. I saw that it was very large, and I noticed that not even one of its hundred windows showed the least glimmer of light. It loomed vast, dark, and silent, as if deserted by every living thing.

The old driver gave a hearty pull at the bell, and the muffled clamour reached me where I stood. I was quaking with fears and apprehensions of that unknown future on whose threshold I was standing. Would Love or Hate open for me the doors of Dupley Walls? I was strung to such a pitch that it seemed impossible for any lesser passion to be handmaiden to my needs.

What I saw when the massive door was at last opened was an aged woman, dressed like a superior domestic, who, in sharp accents, demanded to know what we meant by disturbing a

quiet family in that unseemly way. She was holding one hand over her eyes, and trying to make out our appearance through the gathering darkness. I stepped close up to her. "I am Miss Janet Holme, from Park Hill Seminary," I said, "and I wish to speak with Lady Pollexfen."

CHAPTER II.

THE MISTRESS OF DUPLEY WALLS.

The words were hardly out of my lips when the woman shrank suddenly back, as though struck by an invisible hand, and gave utterance to an inarticulate cry of wonder and alarm. Then, striding forward, she seized me by the wrist, and drew me into the lamp-lighted hall. "Child! child! why have you come here?" she cried, scanning my face with eager eyes. "In all the wide world this is the last place you should have come to."

"Miss Chinfeather is dead, and all the young ladies have been sent to their homes. I have no home, so they have sent me here."

"What shall I do? What will her ladyship say?" cried the woman, in a frightened voice. "How shall I ever dare to tell her?"

"Who rang the bell, Dance, a few minutes ago? And to whom are you talking?"

The voice sounded so suddenly out of the semi-darkness at the upper end of the large hall, which was lighted only by a small oil lamp, that both the woman and I started. Looking in the direction from which the sound had come, I could dimly make out, through the obscurity, the figures of two women who had entered without noise through the curtained doorway, close to which they were now standing. One of the two was very tall, and was dressed entirely in black. The second one, who was less tall, was also dressed in black, except that she seemed to have something white thrown over her head and shoulders; but I was too far away to make out any details.

"Hush! don't you speak," whispered the woman warningly to me. "Leave me to break the news to her ladyship." With that she left me standing on the threshold, and hurried towards the upper end of the hall.

The tall personage in black, then, with the harsh voice—high pitched, and slightly cracked—

was Lady Pollexfen! How fast my heart beat! If only I could have slipped out unobserved I would never have braved my fortune within those walls again.

She who had been called Dance went up to the two ladies, curtsied deeply, and began talking in a low earnest voice. Hardly, however, had she spoken a dozen words, when the lesser of the two ladies flung up her arms with a cry like that of some wounded creature, and would have fallen to the ground had not Dance caught her round the waist and so held her.

"What folly is this?" cried Lady Pollexfen, sternly, striking the pavement of the hall sharply with the iron ferule of her cane. "To your room, Sister Agnes! For such poor weak fools as you solitude is the only safe companion. But, remember your oath! Not a word; not a word." With one lean hand uplifted, and menacing forefinger, she emphasized those last warning words.

She who had been addressed as Sister Agnes raised herself with a deep sigh from the shoulder of Dance, cast one long look in the direction of

the spot where I was standing, and vanished slowly through the curtained arch. Then Dance took up the broken thread of her narration, and Lady Pollexfen, grim and motionless, listened without a word.

Even after Dance had done speaking her ladyship stood for some time looking straight before her, but saying nothing in reply. I felt intuitively that my fate was hanging on the decision of those few moments, but I neither stirred nor spoke.

At length the silence was broken by Lady Pollexfen. "Take the child away," she said; "attend to her wants, make her presentable, and bring her to me in the Green Saloon after dinner. It will be time enough to-morrow to consider what must be done with her."

Dance curtsied again. Her ladyship sailed slowly across the hall, and passed out through another curtained doorway.

Dance's first act was to pay and dismiss the driver who had been waiting outside all this time. Then, taking me by the hand, "Come along with me, dear," she said. "Why, I declare, you

look quite white and frightened! You have nothing to fear, child. We shall not eat you—at least, not just yet; not till we have fed you up a bit."

At the end of a long corridor was Mrs. Dance's own room, into which I was now ushered. Scarcely had I made a few changes in my toilette when tea for two persons was brought in, and Mrs. Dance and I sat down to table. The old lady was well on with her second cup before she made any remark other than was required by the necessities of the occasion.

I have called her an old woman, and such she looked in my youthful eyes, although her years were only about sixty. She wore a dark brown dress, and a black silk apron, and had on a cap with thick frilled borders, under which her grey hair was neatly snooded away. She looked ruddy and full of health. A shrewd sensible woman, evidently, yet with a motherly kindness about her that made me cling to her with a child's unerring instinct.

"You look tired, poor thing," she said, as she leisurely stirred her tea; "and well you may,

considering the long journey you have had to-day. I don't suppose that her ladyship will keep you more than ten minutes in the Green Saloon, and after that you can go to bed as soon as you like. What a surprise for all of us your coming has been! Dear, dear! who would have expected such a thing this morning? But I knew by the twitching of my corns that something uncommon was going to happen. I was really frightened of telling her ladyship that you were here. There's no knowing how she might have taken it; and there's no knowing what she will decide to do with you to-morrow."

"But what has Lady Pollexfen to do with me in any way?" I asked. "Before this morning I never even heard her name, and now it seems that she is to do what she likes with me."

"That she will do what she likes with you, you may depend, dear," said Mrs. Dance. "As to how she happens to have the right so to do, that is another thing, and one about which it is not my place to talk nor yours to question me. That she possesses such a right you may

make yourself certain. All that you have to do is to obey and to ask no questions."

I sat in distressed and bewildered silence for a little while. Then I ventured to say: "Please not to think me rude, but I should like to know who Sister Agnes is."

Mrs. Dance stirred uneasily in her chair and bent her eyes on the fire, but did not immediately answer my question.

"Sister Agnes is Lady Pollexfen's companion," she said at last. "She reads to her, and writes her letters, and talks to her, and all that, you know. Sister Agnes is a Roman Catholic, and came here from the convent of Saint Ursula. However, she is not a nun, but something like one of those Sisters of Mercy in the large towns who go about among poor people, and visit the hospitals and prisons. She is allowed to live here always, and Lady Pollexfen would hardly know how to get through the day without her."

"Is she not a relative of Lady Pollexfen?" I asked.

"No—not a relative," answered Dance. "You must try to love her a great deal, my dear Miss

Janet, for if angels are ever allowed to visit this vile earth, Sister Agnes is one of them. But there goes her ladyship's bell. She is ready to receive you."

I had washed away the stains of travel, and had put on my best frock, and Dance was pleased to say that I looked very nice, "though, perhaps, a trifle more old-fashioned than a girl of your age ought to look." Then she laid down a few rules for my guidance when in the presence of Lady Pollexfen, and led the way to the Green Saloon, I following with a timorous heart.

Dance flung open the folding doors of the big room. "Miss Janet Holme to see your ladyship," she called out, and next moment the doors closed behind me, and I was left standing there alone.

"Come nearer—come nearer," said her ladyship's cracked voice, as with a long lean hand she beckoned me to approach.

I advanced slowly up the room, stopped and curtsied. Lady Pollexfen pointed out a high footstool about three yards from her chair. I curtsied again, and sat down on it. During the

interview that followed my quick eyes had ample opportunity for taking a mental inventory of Lady Pollexfen and her surroundings.

She had exchanged the black dress in which I first saw her for one of green velvet, trimmed with ermine. This dress was made with short sleeves and low body, so as to leave exposed her ladyship's arms, long, lean, and skinny, and her scraggy neck. Her nose was hooked, and her chin pointed. Between the two shone a row of large white even teeth, which long afterwards I knew to be artificial. Equally artificial was the mass of short black frizzly curls that crowned her head, which was unburdened with cap or covering of any kind. Her eyebrows were dyed to match her hair. Her cheeks, even through the powder with which they were thickly smeared, showed two spots of brilliant red, which no one less ignorant than I would have accepted without question as the last genuine remains of the bloom of youth. But at that first interview I accepted everything *au pied de la lettre,* without doubt or question of any kind.

Her ladyship wore long earrings of filigree

gold. Round her neck was a massive gold chain. On her fingers sparkled several rings of price—diamonds, rubies, and opals. In figure her ladyship was tall, and as upright as a dart. She was, however, slightly lame of one foot, which necessitated the use of a cane when walking. Lady Pollexfen's cane was ivory-headed, and had a gold plate let into it, on which was engraved her crest and initials. She was seated in an elaborately-carved high-backed chair, near a table on which were the remains of a dessert for one person.

The Green Saloon was a large gloomy room; at least, it looked gloomy as I saw it for the first time, lighted up by four wax candles where twenty were needed. These four candles being placed close by where Lady Pollexfen was sitting, left the other end of the saloon in comparative darkness. The furniture was heavy, formal, and old-fashioned. Gloomy portraits of dead-and-gone Pollexfens lined the green walls, and this might be the reason why there always seemed to me a slight graveyard flavour—scarcely perceptible, but none the less surely there—about this

room which caused me to shudder involuntarily whenever I crossed its threshold.

Lady Pollexfen's black eyes—large, cold, and steady as Juno's own—had been bent upon me all this time, measuring me from head to foot with what I felt to be a slightly contemptuous scrutiny. "What is your name, and how old are you?" she asked, with startling abruptness, after a minute or two of silence.

"Janet Holme, and twelve years," I answered, laconically. A feeling of defiance, of dislike to this bedizened old woman, began to gnaw my child's heart. Young as I was, I had learned, with what bitterness I alone could have told, the art of wrapping myself round with a husk of cold reserve, which no one uninitiated in the ways of children could penetrate, unless I were inclined to let them. Sulkiness was the generic name for this quality at school, but I dignified it with a different term.

"How many years were you at Park Hill Seminary? and where did you live before you went there?" asked Lady Pollexfen.

"I have lived at Park Hill ever since I can re-

member anything. I don't know where I lived before that time."

"Are your parents alive or dead? If the latter, what do you remember of them?"

A lump came into my throat, and tears into my eyes. For a moment or two I could not answer. "I don't know anything about my parents," I said. "I never remember seeing them. I don't know whether they are alive or dead."

"Do you know why you were consigned by the Park Hill people to this particular house—to Dupley Walls—to Me, in fact?"

Her voice was raised almost to a shriek as she said these last words, and she pointed to herself with one claw-like finger.

"No, my lady, I don't know why I was sent here. I was told to come, and I came."

"But you have no claim on me—none whatever," she continued, fiercely. "Bear that in mind: remember it always. Whatever I may choose to do for you, will be done of my own free will, and not through compulsion of any

kind. No claim whatever; remember that. None whatever."

She was silent for some time after this, and sat with her cold steady eyes fixed intently on the fire. For my part, I sat as still as a mouse, afraid to stir, longing for my dismissal, and dreading to be questioned further.

Lady Pollexfen roused herself at length with a deep sigh, and a few words muttered under her breath. "Here is a bunch of grapes for you, child," she said. "When you have eaten them it will be time for you to retire."

I advanced timidly, and took the grapes, with a curtsey and a "Thank you, my lady," and then went back to my seat.

As I sat eating my grapes my eyes went up to an oval mirror over the fire-place, in which were reflected the figures of Lady Pollexfen and myself. My momentary glance into its depths showed me how keenly but furtively her ladyship was watching me. But what interest could a great lady have in watching poor insignificant me? I ventured another glance into the mirror. Yes, she looked as if she were devouring

me with her eyes. But hothouse grapes are nicer than mysteries, and how is it possible to give one's serious attention to two things at a time?

When I had finished the grapes, I put my plate back on the table. "Ring that bell," said Lady Pollexfen. I rang it accordingly, and presently Dance made her appearance.

"Miss Holme is ready to retire," said her ladyship.

I arose, and going a step or two nearer to her, I made her my most elaborate curtsey, and said, "I wish your ladyship a very good night."

The ghost of a smile flickered across her face. "I am pleased to find, child, that you are not entirely destitute of manners," she said, and with a stately wave of the arm I was dismissed.

It was like an escape from slavery to hear the door of the Green Saloon shut behind me, and to get into the great corridors and passages outside. I could have capered for very glee; only Mrs. Dance was a staid sort of person, and might not have liked it.

"Her ladyship is pleased with you, I'm sure," she remarked, as we went along.

"That is more than I am with her," I answered, pertly. Mrs. Dance looked shocked.

"You must not talk in that way, dear, not on any account," she said. "You must try to like Lady Pollexfen; it is to your interest to do so. But even should you never learn to like her, you must not let any one know it."

"I'm sure that I shall like the lady you call Sister Agnes," I said. "When shall I see her? To-morrow?"

Mrs. Dance looked at me sharply for a moment. "You think you shall like Sister Agnes, eh? When you come to know her, you will more than like her; you will love her. But perhaps Lady Pollexfen will not allow you to see her."

"But why not?" I said, abruptly, and I could feel my eyes flash with anger.

"The why not I am not at liberty to explain," said Mrs. Dance, drily. "And let me tell you, Miss Janet Holme, there are many things under this roof of which no explanation will be given

you, and if you are a wise, good girl, you will not ask too many questions. I tell you this simply for your own good. Lady Pollexfen cannot abear people that are always prying and asking, What does this mean? and what does the other mean? A still tongue is the sign of a wise head."

Ten minutes later I had said my prayers, and was in bed. "Don't go without kissing me," I said to Dance, as she took up the candle.

The old lady came back and kissed me tenderly. "Heaven bless you, and keep you, my dear!" she said, with solemn dignity. "There are those in the world who love you very dearly, and some day perhaps you will know all. I dare not say more. Good night, and God bless you."

Mrs. Dance's words reached a chord in my heart that vibrated to the slightest touch. I cried myself silently to sleep.

How long I had been asleep I had no means of knowing, but I was awakened sometime in the night by a rain of kisses, soft, warm, and light, on lips, cheeks, and forehead. The room was pitch dark, and for a second or two I thought I

was still at Park Hill, and that Miss Chinfeather had come back from heaven to tell me how much she loved me. But this thought passed away like the slide of a magic lantern, and I knew that I was at Dupley Walls. The moment I knew this I put out my arms with the intention of clasping my unknown visitor round the neck. But I was not quick enough. The kisses ceased, my hands met each other in the empty air, and I heard a faint noise of garments trailing across the floor. I started up in bed, and called out, in a frightened voice, "Who's there?"

"Hush! not a word!" whispered a voice out of the darkness. Then I heard the door of my room softly closed, and I felt that I was alone.

I was left as wide awake as ever I had been in my life. My child's heart was filled with an unspeakable yearning, and yet the darkness and the mystery frightened me. It could not be Miss Chinfeather who had visited me, I argued with myself. The lips that had touched mine were not those of a corpse, but were instinct with life and love. Who, then, could my mysterious visitor be? Not Lady Pollexfen, surely!

I half started up in bed at the thought. Just as I did so, without warning of any kind, a solemn muffled tramp became audible in the room immediately over mine. A tramp, slow, heavy, measured, from one end of the room to the other, and then back again. I slipped back into the bedclothes and buried myself up to the ears. I could hear the beating of my heart, oppressed now with a new terror before which the lesser one faded utterly. The very monotony of that dull measured walk was enough to unstring the nerves of a child, coming as it did in the middle of the night. I tried to escape from it by going still deeper under the clothes, but I could hear it even then. Since I could not escape it altogether, I had better listen to it with all my ears, for it was quite possible that it might come downstairs, and so into my room. Had such a thing happened, I think I should have died from sheer terror. Happily for me nothing of the kind took place; and, still listening, I fell asleep at last from utter weariness, and knew nothing more till I was awoke by a stray sunbeam smiting me across the eyes.

CHAPTER III.

A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY.

A GOLDEN sunbeam was shining through a crevice in the blinds; the birds were twittering in the ivy outside; oxen were lowing to each other across the park. Morning, with all her music, was abroad.

I started up in bed and rubbed my eyes. Within the house everything was as mute as the grave. That horrible tramping overhead had ceased—had ceased, doubtless, with the return of daylight, which would otherwise have shifted it from the region of the weird to that of the commonplace. I smiled to myself as I thought of my terrors of the past night, and felt brave enough just then to have faced a thousand ghosts. In another minute I was out of bed, and had drawn up my blind, and flung open my window, and was drinking in the sweet peaceful scene

that stretched away before me in long level lines to the edge of a far-off horizon.

My window was high up and looked out at the front of the hall. Immediately below me was a semicircular lawn, shut in from the park by an invisible fence, close shaven, and clumped with baskets of flowers glowing just now with all the brilliance of late autumn. The main entrance—a flight of shallow steps, and an Ionic portico, as I afterwards found—was at one end of the building, and was reached by a long straight carriage drive, the route of which could be traced across the park by the thicker growth of trees with which it was fringed. This park stretched to right and left for a mile either way. In front, it was bounded, a short half-mile away, by the high road, beyond which were level wide-stretching meadows through which the river Adair washed slow and clear.

But chief of all this morning I wanted to be down among the flowers. I made haste to wash and dress, taking an occasional peep through the window as I did so, and trying to entice the birds from their hiding-places in the ivy. Then

I opened my bedroom door, and then, in view of the great landing outside, I paused. Several doors, all except mine now closed, gave admittance from this landing to different rooms. Both landing and stairs were made of oak, black and polished with age. One broad flight of stairs, with heavy carved banisters, pointed the way below; a second and narrower flight led to the regions above. As a matter of course I chose the former, but not till after a minute's hesitation as to whether I should venture to leave my room at all before I should be called. But my desire to see the baskets of flowers prevailed over everything else. I closed my door gently and hurried down.

I found myself in the entrance-hall of Dupley Walls, into which I had been ushered on my arrival. There were the two curtained doorways through which Lady Pollexfen had come and gone. For the rest, it was a gloomy place enough, with its flagged floor, and its diamond-paned windows high up in the semicircular roof. A few rusty full-lengths graced the walls; the stairs were guarded by two effigies in armour;

a marble bust of one of the Cæsars stood on a high pedestal in the middle of the floor; and that was all.

I was glad to get away from this dismal spot and to find myself in the passage which led to the housekeeper's room. I opened the door and looked in, but the room was vacant. Farther along the same passage I found the kitchen and other domestic offices. The kitchen clock was just on the point of six as I went in. One servant alone had come down. From her I enquired my way into the garden, and next minute I was on the lawn. The close-cropped grass was wet with the heavy dew; but my boots were thick and I heeded it not, for the flowers were there within my very grasp.

Oh, those flowers! can I ever forget them? I have seen none so beautiful since. There can be none so beautiful out of Paradise.

One spray of scarlet geranium was all that I ventured to pluck. But the odours and the colours were there for all comers, and were as much mine for the time being as if the flowers themselves had belonged to me. Suddenly I

turned and glanced up at the many-windowed house with a sort of guilty consciousness that I might possibly be doing wrong. But the house was still asleep—closed shutters or down-drawn blind at every window. I saw before me a substantial-looking red-brick mansion, with a high slanting roof, of not undignified appearance now that it was mellowed by age, but with no pretensions to architectural beauty. The sole attempt at outside ornamentation consisted of a few flutings of white stone, reaching from the ground to the second floor, and terminating in oval shields of the same material, on which had originally been carved the initials of the builder and the date of erection; but the summer's sun and the winter's rain of many a long year had rubbed both letters and figures carefully out. Long afterwards I knew that Dupley Walls had been built in the reign of the Third William by a certain Squire Pollexfen of that date, "out of my own head," as he himself put it in a quaint document still preserved among the family archives; and rather a muddled head it must have been in matters architectural.

After this, I ventured round by the main entrance, with its gravelled carriage sweep, to the other side of the house, where I found a long flagged terrace bordered with large evergreens in tubs placed at frequent intervals. On to this terrace several French windows opened—the windows, as I found later in the day, of Lady Pollexfen's private rooms. To the left of this terrace stood a plantation of young trees, through which a winding path that opened by a wicket into the private grounds, invited me to penetrate. Through the green gloom I advanced bravely, my heart beating with all the pleasure of one who was exploring some unknown land. I saw no living thing by the way, save two grey rabbits that scuttered across my path and vanished in the undergrowth on the other side. Pretty frisky creatures! how I should like to have caught them, and fed them, and made pets of them as long as they lived!

Two or three hundred yards farther on the path ended with another wicket, now locked, which opened into the high road. About a mile away I could discern the roofs and chimneys of a

little town. When I got back to the hall I found dear old Dance getting rather anxious at my long absence, but she brightened into smiles when I kissed her and told her where I had been.

"You must have slept well, or you would hardly look so rosy this morning," she said, as we sat down to breakfast.

"I should have slept very well if I had not been troubled by the ghosts."

"Ghosts! my dear Miss Janet? You do not mean to say——" and the old lady's cheek paled suddenly, and her cup rattled in her saucer as she held it.

"I mean to say that Dupley Walls is haunted by two ghosts, one of which came and kissed me last night when I was asleep; while the other one was walking nearly all night in the room over mine."

Dance's face brightened, but still wore a puzzled expression. "You must have dreamed that some one kissed you, dear," she said. "If you were asleep you could not know anything about it."

"But I was awakened by it, and I am positive that it was no dream." Then I told her what few particulars there were to tell.

"For the future we must lock your bedroom door," she said.

"Then I should be worse frightened than ever. Besides, a real ghost would not be kept out by locking the door."

"Well, dear, tell me if you are disturbed in the same way again. But as for the tramping you heard in the room overhead, that is easily explained. It was no ghost that you heard walking, but Lady Pollexfen." Then, seeing my look of astonishment, she went on to explain. "You see, my dear Miss Janet, her ladyship is a very peculiar person, and does many things that to commonplace people like you and me may seem rather strange. One of these little peculiarities is her fondness for walking about the room over yours at night. Now, if she likes to do this, I know of no reason why she should not do it. It is a little whim that does no harm to anybody; and as the house and everything in it

are her own, she may surely please herself in such a trifle."

"But what is there in the room that she should prefer it to any other in the house for walking in by night?" I asked.

"What—is—there—in the room?" said the old lady, staring at me across the table with a strange frightened look in her eyes. "What a curious question! The room is a common room, of course, with nothing in it out of the ordinary way; only, as I said before, it happens to be Lady Pollexfen's whim to walk there. So, if you hear the noise again, you will know how to account for it, and will have too much good sense to feel in the least afraid."

I had a half consciousness that Dance was prevaricating with me in this matter, or hiding something from me; but I was obliged to accept her version as the correct one, especially as I saw that any further questioning would be of no avail.

I did not see Lady Pollexfen that day. She was reported to be unwell, and kept her own rooms.

About noon a message came from Sister

Agnes that she would like to see me in her room. When I entered she was standing by a square oak table, resting one hand on it while the other was pressed to her heart. Her face was very pale, but her dark eyes beamed on me with a veiled tenderness that I could not misinterpret.

"Good morrow, Miss Holme," she said, offering a white slender hand for my acceptance. "I am afraid that you will find Dupley Walls even duller than Park Hill Seminary."

Her tone was cold and constrained. I looked up earnestly into her face. Her lips began to quiver painfully. Suddenly she stooped and kissed me. "Child! child! you must not look at me in that way," she cried.

Instinct whispered something in my ear. "You are the lady who came and kissed me when I was asleep!" I exclaimed.

Her brow contracted for a moment as if she were in pain. A hectic spot came out suddenly on either cheek, and vanished almost as swiftly. "Yes, it was I who came to your room last night," she said. "You are not vexed with me for doing so?"

"On the contrary, I love you for it."

Her smile, the sweetest I ever saw, beamed out at this. Gently she stroked my hair. "You looked so forlorn and weary last night," she said, "that after I got to bed I could not help thinking about you. I was afraid you would not be able to sleep in a strange place, so I could not rest till I had visited you: but I never intended to awake you."

"I do not mind how often I am awakened the same way," I said. "No one has ever seemed to love me but you, and I cannot help loving you back."

"Ma pauvre petite!" was all she said. We had sat down by this time close to the window, and Sister Agnes was holding one of my hands in hers and caressing it gently as she gazed dreamily across the park. My eyes, childlike, wandered from her to the room and then back again. The picture still lives in my memory as fresh as though it had been limned but yesterday.

A square whitewashed room, fitted up with furniture of unpolished oak. On the walls a few

proof engravings of subjects taken from Sacred History. A small bookcase in one corner, and a *prie-dieu* in another. The floor uncarpeted, but polished after the French fashion. A writing-table; a large workbox; a heap of clothing for the poor; and lastly, a stand for flowers.

The features of Sister Agnes were as delicate and clearly cut as those of some antique statue, but their habitual expression was one of intense melancholy. Her voice was low and gracious: the voice of a refined and educated gentlewoman. Her hair was black, with here and there a faint silver streak; but the peculiar head-dress of white linen which she wore left very little of it visible. Disfiguring as this head-dress might have been to many people, in her case it served merely to enhance the marble whiteness and transparent purity of her complexion. Her eyebrows were black and well-defined; but as for the eyes themselves, I can only repeat what I said before, that their dark depths were full of tenderness and a sort of veiled enthusiasm difficult to describe in words. Her dress was black, soft, and coarse, relieved by deep cuffs of white

linen. Her solitary ornament, if ornament it could be called, was a rosary of black beads. Not without reason have I been thus particular in describing Sister Agnes and her surroundings, as they who read will discover for themselves by-and-by.

Sister Agnes woke up from her reverie with a sigh, and began talking to me about my school-days, and my mode of life at Park Hill Seminary. It was a pleasure to me to talk, because I felt that it was a pleasure to her to listen to me. And she let me talk on and on for I can't tell how long, only putting in a question now and again, till she knew almost as much about Miss Chinfeather and Park Hill as I knew myself. But she never seemed to weary. We were sitting close together, and after a time I felt her arm steal gently round my waist, pressing me closer still; and so, with my head nestling against her shoulder, I talked on, heedless of the time. O happy afternoon!

It was broken by a summons for Sister Agnes from Lady Pollexfen. "To-morrow, if the weather hold fine, we will go to Charke Forest and gather

blackberries," said Sister Agnes, as she gave me a parting kiss.

That night I went early to bed, and never woke till daybreak.

CHAPTER IV.

SCARSDALE WEIR.

I was up betimes next morning, long before Sister Agnes could possibly be ready to take me to the forest. So I took my sewing into the garden, and found a pleasant sunny nook, where I sat and worked till breakfast time. The meal was scarcely over when Sister Agnes sent for me. It made my heart leap with pleasure to see how her beautiful melancholy face lighted up at my approach. Why should she feel such an interest in one whom she had never seen till a few hours ago? The question was one I could not answer; I could only recognise the fact, and be thankful.

The morning was delicious; sunny, without being oppressive; while in the shade there was a faint touch of austerity like the first breath of coming winter. A walk of two miles brought

us to the skirts of the forest, and in five minutes after quitting the high road we might have been a hundred miles away from any habitation, so utterly lost and buried from the outer world did we seem to be. Already the forest paths were half hidden by fallen leaves, which rustled pleasantly under our feet. By-and-by we came to a pretty opening in the wood, where some charitable soul had erected a rude rustic seat, that was more than half covered with the initials of idle wayfarers. Here Sister Agnes sat down to rest. She had brought a volume of poems with her, and while she read I wandered about, never going very far away, feasting on the purple blackberries, finding here and there a late-ripened cluster of nuts, trying to find out a nest or two among the thinned foliage, and enjoying myself in a quiet way, much to my heart's content.

I don't think Sister Agnes read much that morning. Her gaze was oftener away from her book than on it. After a time she came and joined me in gathering nuts and blackberries. She seemed brighter and happier than I had

LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

hitherto seen her, entering into all my little projects with as much eagerness as though she were herself a child. How soon I had learned to love her! Why had I lived all those dreary years at Park Hill without knowing her? But I could never again feel quite so lonely, never quite such an outcast from that common household love which all the girls I had known seemed to accept as a matter of course. Even if I should unhappily be separated from Sister Agnes, I could not cease to love her; and although I had seen her for the first time barely forty-eight hours ago, my child's instinct told me that she possessed that steadfastness, sweet and strong, which allows no name that has once been written on its heart to be erased therefrom for ever.

My thoughts were running in some such groove, but they were all as tangled and confused as the luxuriant undergrowth around me. It must have been out of this confusion that the impulse arose which caused me to address a question to Sister Agnes that startled her as much as if a shell had exploded at her feet.

"Dear Sister Agnes," I said, "you seem to know my history, and all about me. Did you know my papa and mamma?"

She dropped the leaf that held her fruit, and turned on me a haggard frightened face, that made my own grow pale. "What makes you think that I know your history?" she stammered out.

"You who are so intimate with Lady Pollexfen must know why I was brought to Dupley Walls: you must know something about me. If you know anything about my father and mother, oh! do please tell me; please do!"

"I am tired, Janet. Let us sit down," she said, wearily. So, hand in hand, we went back to the rustic seat and sat down.

She sat for a minute or two without speaking, gazing straight before her into some far-away forest vista, but seeing only with that inner eye which searches through the dusty chambers of heart and brain whenever some record of the past has to be brought forth to answer the questions of to-day.

"I do know your history, dear child," she said

at length, "and both your parents were friends of mine."

"Were! Then neither of them is alive?"

"Alas! no. They have been dead many years. Your father was drowned in one of the Italian lakes. Your mother died a year afterwards."

All the sweet vague hopes that I had cherished in secret, ever since I could remember anything, of some day finding at least one of my parents alive, died out utterly as Sister Agnes said these words. My heart seemed to faint within me. I flung myself into her arms, and burst into tears.

Very tenderly and lovingly, with sweet caresses and words of comfort, did Sister Agnes strive to win me back to cheerfulness. Her efforts were not unsuccessful, and after a time I grew calmer, and recovered my self-possession; and as soon as so much was accomplished we set out on our return to Dupley Walls. As we rose to go, I said, "Since you have told me so much, Sister Agnes, will you not also tell me why I have been brought to Dupley Walls, and why Lady Pollexfen has anything to do with me?"

"That is a question, dear Janet, which I cannot answer," she said. "I am bound to Lady Pollexfen by a solemn promise not to reveal to you the nature of the secret bond which has brought you under her roof. That she has your welfare at heart you may well believe, and that it is to your interest to please her in every possible way is equally certain. More than this I dare not say, except that there are certain pages of your history, some of them of a very painful character, which it would not be advisable that you should read till you shall be many years older than you are now. Meanwhile, rest assured that in Lady Pollexfen, however eccentric she may seem to be, you have a firm and powerful friend; while in me, who have neither influence nor power, you have one who simply loves you, and prays night and day for your welfare."

"And you will never cease to love me, will you?" I said, just as we stepped out of the forest into the high road.

She took both my hands in hers and looked me straight in the face. "Never, while I live, Janet Holme, can I cease to love you," she said.

Then we kissed and went on our way towards Dupley Walls.

"You are to dine with her ladyship to-day, Miss Janet," said Dance the same afternoon. "We must look out your best bib and tucker."

Dance seemed to think that a mighty honour was about to be conferred upon me, but for my own part I would have given much to forego the distinction. However, there was no help for it, so I submitted quietly to having my hair dressed and to being inducted into my best frock. I was dreadfully abashed when the footman threw open the dining-room door and announced in a loud voice, "Miss Janet Holme."

Dinner had just been served, and her ladyship was waiting. I advanced up the room and made my curtsey. Lady Pollexfen looked at me grimly, without relaxing a muscle, and then extended a lean forefinger, which I pressed respectfully. The butler indicated a chair, and I sat down. Next moment Sister Agnes glided in through a side door, and took her place at the table, but considerably apart both from Lady

Pollexfen and me. I felt infinitely relieved by her presence.

Her ladyship looked as elaborately youthful, with her pink cheeks, her black wig, and her large white teeth, as on the evening of my arrival at Dupley Walls. But her hands shook a little, making the diamonds on her fingers scintillate in the candlelight as she carried her food to her mouth, and this was a sign of age which not all the art in the world could obviate. The table was laid out with a quantity of old-fashioned plate; indeed, the plate was out of all proportion to the dinner, which consisted of nothing more elaborate than some mutton broth, a roast pullet, and a custard. But there was a good deal of show, and we were waited on assiduously by a respectable but fatuous-looking butler. There was no wine brought out, but some old ale was poured into her ladyship's glass from a silver flagon. Sister Agnes had a small cover laid apart from ours. Her dinner consisted of herbs, fruit, bread, and water. It pained me to see that the look of intense melancholy which had lightened so wonderfully during

our forest walk, had again overshadowed her face like a veil. She gave me one long, earnest look as she took her seat at the table, but after that she seemed scarcely to be aware of my presence.

We had sat in grim silence for full five minutes, when Lady Pollexfen spoke.

"Can you speak French, child?" she said, turning abruptly to me.

"I can read it a little, but I cannot speak it," I replied.

"Nor understand what is said when it is spoken in your presence?"

"No, your ladyship."

"So much the better," she answered with a grating laugh. "Children have long ears, and there is no freedom of conversation when they are present." With that she addressed some remarks in French to Sister Agnes, who replied to her in the same language. I knew nothing about my ears being long, but her ladyship's words had made them tingle as if they had been boxed. For one thing I was thankful—that no further remarks were addressed to me during dinner. The conversation in French became

animated, and I had leisure to think of other things.

Dinner was quickly over, and at a signal from her ladyship the folding doors were thrown open, and we defiled into the Green Saloon, I bringing up the rear meekly. On the table were fruit and flowers, and one small bottle of some light wine. The butler filled her ladyship's glass, and then withdrew.

"You can take a pear, little girl," said Lady Pollexfen. Accordingly I took a pear, but when I had got it I was too timid to eat it, and could do nothing but hold it between my hot palms. Had I been at Park Hill Seminary, I would soon have made my teeth meet in the fruit, but I was not quite certain as to the proper mode of eating pears in society.

Lady Pollexfen placed her glass in her eye, and examined me critically.

"Haie! haie!" she said. "That good Chinfeather has not quite eradicated our gaucherie, it seems. We are deficient in ease and aplomb. What is the name of that Frenchwoman, Agnes, who 'finished' Lady Kinbuck's girls?"

"You mean Madame Duclos."

"The same. Look out her address to-morrow, and remind me that you write to her. If mademoiselle here remain in England, she will grow up weedy, and will never learn to carry her shoulders properly. Besides, the child has scarcely two words to say for herself. A little Parisian training may prove beneficial. At her age a French girl of family would be a little duchess in bearing and manners, even though she had never been outside the walls of her *pension*. How is such an anomaly to be accounted for? It is possible that the atmosphere may have something to do with it."

Here was fresh food for wonder, and for such serious thought as my age admitted of. I was to be sent to a school in France! I could not make up my mind whether to be sorry or glad. In truth, I was neither wholly the one nor the other; the tangled web of my feelings was something altogether beyond my skill to unravel.

Lady Pollexfen sipped her wine absently for a while; Sister Agnes was busy with some fine

needlework ; and I was striving to elaborate a giant and his attendant dwarf out of the glowing embers and cavernous recesses of the wood fire, while there was yet an underlying vein of thought at work in my mind which busied itself desultorily with trying to piece together all that I had ever heard or read of life in a French school.

"You can run away now, little girl. You are *de trop*," said her ladyship, turning on me in her abrupt fashion. "And you, Agnes, may as well read to me a couple of chapters out of the *Girondins*. What a wonderful man was that Robespierre! What a giant! Had he but lived, how different the history of Europe would have been from what we know it to-day."

I could almost have kissed her ladyship of my own accord, so pleased was I to get away. I made my curtsey to her, and also to Sister Agnes, whose only reply was a sweet sad smile, and managed to preserve my dignity till I was out of the room. But when the door was safely closed behind me, I ran, I flew along the passages till I reached the housekeeper's room. Dance was not there, neither had candles yet

been lighted. The bright moonlight pouring in through the window, gave me a new idea.

I had not yet been down to look at the river! What time could be better than the present one for such a purpose? I had heard some of the elder girls at Park Hill talk of the delights of boating by moonlight. Boating in the present case was out of the question, but there was the river itself to be seen. Taking my hat and scarf, I let myself out by a side door, and then sped away across the park like a hunted fawn, not forgetting to take an occasional bite at her ladyship's pear. To-night, for a wonder, my mind seemed purged of all those strange fears and stranger fancies engendered in it, some people would say, by superstition, while others would hold that they were merely the effects of a delicate nervous organization and an over-excitable brain reacting one upon the other. Be that as it may, for this night they had left me, and I skipped on my way as fearlessly as though I were walking at mid-day, and with a glorious sense of freedom working within me,

such, only in a more intense degree, as I had often felt on our rare holidays at school.

There was a right of public footpath across one corner of the park. Tracking this narrow white ribbon through the greensward, I came at length to a stile which admitted me into the high road. Exactly opposite was a second stile opening on a second footpath, which I felt sure could lead to nowhere but the river. Nor was I mistaken. In another five minutes I was on the banks of the Adair.

To my child's eyes the scene was one of exquisite beauty. To-day, I should probably call it flat, and wanting in variety. The equable full-flowing river was lighted up by a full and unclouded moon. The undergrowth that fringed its banks was silver-foliaged; silver white rose the mists in the meadows. Silence everywhere, save for the low liquid murmur of the river itself, which seemed burdened with some love secret, centuries old, which it was vainly striving to tell in articulate words.

The burden of the beauty lay upon me and saddened me. I wandered slowly along the

bank, watching the play of moonlight on the river. Suddenly I saw a tiny boat that was moored to an overhanging willow, and floated out the length of its chain towards the middle of the stream. I looked around. Not a creature of any kind was visible. Then I thought to myself, "how pleasant it would be to sit out there in the boat for a little while. And surely no one could be angry with me for taking such a liberty—not even the owner of the boat if he were to find me there."

No sooner said than done. I went down to the edge of the river, and drew the boat inshore by the chain that held it. Then I stepped gingerly in, half frightened at my own temerity, and sat down. The boat glided slowly out again to the length of its chain and then became motionless. But it was motionless only for a moment or two. A splash in the water drew my attention to the chain. It had been insecurely fastened to a branch of the willow; my weight in the boat had caused it to become detached and fall into the water, and with horrified eyes I saw that I had now no means of getting back

to the shore. Next moment the strength of the current carried the boat out into mid-stream, and I began to float slowly down the river.

I sat like one paralysed, unable either to stir or speak. The willows seemed to bow their heads in mocking farewell as I glided past them. I heard the faint baying of a dog on some distant farm, and it sounded like a death-note in my frightened ears. Suddenly the spell that had held me was loosened, and I started to my feet. The boat heeled over, and but for a sudden instinctive movement backward I should have gone headlong into the river, and have ended my troubles there and then. The boat righted itself, veered half round, and then went steadily on its way down the stream. I sank on my knees and buried my face in my hands, and began to cry. When I had cried a little while it came into my mind that I would say my prayers. So I said them, with clasped hands and wet eyes, and the words seemed to come from me and affect me in a way that I had never experienced before. As I write these lines I have

a vivid recollection of noticing how blurred and large the moon looked through my tears.

My heart was now quieted a little; I was no longer so utterly overmastered by my fears. I was recalled to a more vivid sense of earth and its realities by the low melancholy striking of some village clock. I gazed eagerly along both banks of the river, but although the moon shone so brightly, neither house nor church nor any sign of human habitation was visible. When the clock had told its last syllable, the silence seemed even more profound than before. I might have been floating on a river that wound through a country never trodden by the foot of man, so entirely alone, so utterly removed from all human aid, did I feel myself to be.

I drew the skirt of my frock over my shoulders, for the night air was beginning to chill me, and contrived to regain the seat I had taken on first entering the boat. Whither would the river carry me? was the question I now put to myself, To the sea, doubtless. Had I not been taught at school that sooner or later all rivers emptied themselves into the ocean? The

immensity of the thought appalled me. It seemed to chill the beating of my heart; I grew cold from head to foot. Still the boat held its course steadily, swept onward by the resistless current; still the willows nodded their fantastic farewells. Along the level meadows far and wide the white mist lay like a vast winding-sheet; now and then through the stillness I heard, or seemed to hear, a moan—a mournful wail, as of some spirit just released from earthly bonds, and forced to leave its dear ones behind. The moonlight looked cruel, and the water very, very cold. Some one had told me that death by drowning was swift and painless. Those stars up there were millions of miles away: how long would it take my soul, I wondered, to travel that distance—to reach those glowing orbs—to leave them behind? How glorious such a journey, beyond all power of thought,—to track one's way among the worlds that flash through space! In the world I should leave there would be one person only who would mourn for me—Sister Agnes, who would——But what noise was that?

A noise, low and faint at first, just taking the edge of silence with a musical murmur that seemed to die out for an instant now and again, then coming again stronger than before, and so growing by fine degrees louder and more confirmed, and resolving itself at last into a sound which could not be mistaken for that of anything but falling water. The sound was clearly in front of me,—I was being swept resistlessly towards it. A curve of the river and a swelling of the banks hid everything from me. The sound was momently growing louder, and had distinctly resolved itself into the roar and rush of some great body of water. I shuddered and grasped the sides of the boat with both hands. Suddenly the curve was rounded, and there, almost immediately in front of me, was a mass of buildings, and there, too, spanning the river, was what looked to me like a trellis-work bridge, and on the bridge was a human figure. The roar and noise of the cataract were deafening, but louder than all was my piercing cry for help. He who stood on the bridge heard it. I saw him fling up his hands as if in sudden horror,

and that was the last thing I did see. I sank down with shut eyes in the bottom of the boat, and my heart went up in a silent cry to heaven. Next moment I was swept over Scarsdale Weir. The boat seemed to glide from under me; my head struck something hard; the water overwhelmed me, seized on me, dashed me here and there in its merciless arms; a noise as of a thousand cataracts filled my ears for a moment, and then I recollect nothing more.

CHAPTER V.

AT ROSE COTTAGE.

On regaining my senses I found myself in a cozy little bed, in a cozy little room, with an old gentleman sitting by my side gently chafing one of my hands—a gentleman with white hair and a white moustache, with a ruddy face, and a smile that made me fall in love with him at first sight.

"Did I not say that she would do famously in a little while?" he cried, in a cheery voice that it did one good to listen to. "I believe the Poppetina has only been hoaxing us all this time: pretending to be half-drowned just to find out whether anybody would make a fuss about her. Is not that the truth, little one?"

"If you please, sir, where am I? And are you a doctor?" I asked, faintly.

"I am not a doctor, either of medicine or

law," answered the white-haired gentleman. "I am Major Strickland, and this place is Rose Cottage—the magnificent mansion which I call my own. But you had better not talk, dearie—at least not just yet: not till the doctor himself has seen you."

"But how did I get here?" I pleaded. "Do tell me that, please."

"Simply thus. My nephew Geordie was out mooning on the bridge when he heard a cry for help. Next minute he saw you and your boat go over the weir. He rushed down to the quiet water at the foot of the falls, plunged in, and fished you out before you had time to get more than half-drowned. My housekeeper, Deborah, put you to bed, and here you are. But I am afraid that you have hurt yourself among those ugly stones that line the weir; so Geordie has gone off for the doctor, and we shall soon know how you really are. One question I must ask you in order that I may send word to your friends. What is your name? and where do you live?"

Before I could reply the village doctor came

bounding up the stairs three at a time. Five minutes sufficed him for my case. A good night's rest and a bottle of his mixture were all that was required. A few hours would see me as well as ever. Then he went.

"And now for the name and address, Poppetina," said the smiling major. "We must send word to papa and mamma without a moment's delay."

"I have neither papa nor mamma," I answered. "My name is Janet Holme, and I come from Dupley Walls."

"From Dupley Walls!" exclaimed the major. "I thought I knew everybody under Lady Pollexfen's roof, but I never heard of you before to-night, my dear."

Then I told him that I had been only two days with Lady Pollexfen, and that all of my previous life that I could remember had been spent at Park Hill Seminary.

The major was evidently puzzled by what I had told him. He mused for several moments without speaking. Hitherto my face had been in half-shadow, the candle having been placed

behind the curtain that fell round the head of the bed, so as not to dazzle my eyes. This candle the major now took, and held it about a yard above my head, so that its full light fell on my upturned face. I was swathed in a blanket, and while addressing the major had raised myself on my elbow in bed. My long black hair, still damp, fell wildly round my shoulders.

The moment Major Strickland's eyes rested on my face, on which the full light of the candle was now shining, his ruddy cheek paled; he started back in amazement, and was obliged to replace the candlestick on the table.

"Great Heavens! what a marvellous resemblance!" he exclaimed. "It cannot arise from accident merely. There must be a hidden link somewhere."

Then taking the candle for the second time, he scanned my face again with eyes that seemed to pierce me through and through. "It is as if one had come to me suddenly from the dead," I heard him say in a low voice. Then with

down-bent head and folded arms he took several turns across the room.

"Sir, of whom do I remind you?" I timidly asked.

"Of some one, child, whom I knew when I was young—of some one who died long years before you were born." There was a ring of pathos in his voice that seemed like the echo of some sorrowful story.

"Are you sure that you have no other name than Janet Holme?" he asked, presently.

"None, sir, that I know of. I have been called Janet Holme ever since I can remember."

"But about your parents. What were they called, and where did they live?"

"I know nothing whatever about them except what Sister Agnes told me yesterday."

"And she said—what?"

"That my father was drowned abroad several years ago, and that my mother died a year later."

"Poverina! But it is strange that Sister Agnes should have known your parents. Perhaps

she can supply the missing link. The mention of her name reminds me that I have not yet sent word to Dupley Walls that you are safe and sound at Rose Cottage. Geordie must start without a moment's delay. I am an old friend of Lady Pollexfen, my dear, so that she will be quite satisfied when she learns that you are under my roof."

"But, sir, when shall I see the gentleman who got me out of the water?" I asked.

"What, Geordie? Oh, you'll see Geordie in the morning, never fear. A good boy! a fine boy! though it's his old uncle that says it."

Then he rang the bell, and when Deborah, his only servant, came up, he committed me with many injunctions into her charge. Then taking my head gently between his hands, he kissed me tenderly on the forehead, and wished me "Good-night, and happy dreams."

Deborah was very kind. She brought me up a delicious little supper, and decided that there was no need for me to take the doctor's nauseous

mixture. She took it herself instead, but merely as a sop to her conscience and my own; "for, after all, you know, there's very little difference in physic—it's all nasty; and I daresay this mixture will do my lumbago no harm."

The effects of the accident had almost entirely passed away by next morning, and I was dressed and downstairs by seven o'clock. I found the major hard at work digging up the garden for his winter crops. "Ah, Poppetina, down so early!" he cried. "And how do we feel this morning, eh? None the worse for our ducking, I hope."

I assured him that I was quite well, and that I had never felt better in my life.

"That will be good news for her ladyship," he replied, "and will prove to her that Miss Holme has not fallen among Philistines. In any case, she cannot be more pleased than I am to find that you have sustained no harm from your accident. There is something, Poverina, in that face of yours that brings back the past to me strangely. But here comes Master Geordie."

I turned and saw a young man sauntering slowly down the pathway. He was very fair, and, to me, seemed very handsome. He had blue eyes, and his hair was a mass of short, crisp flaxen curls. From the way in which the major regarded him as he came lounging up, I could see that the old soldier was very proud of his young Adonis of a nephew. The latter lifted his hat as he opened the wicket, and bade his uncle good morning. Me he did not for the moment see.

"Miss Holme is not up yet, I suppose?" he said. "I hope she is none the worse for her tumble over the weir."

"Our little water-nymph is here to answer for herself," said the major. "The roses in her cheeks seem all the brighter for their wetting."

George Strickland turned smilingly towards me, and held out his hand. "I am very glad, Miss Holme, to find that you have suffered so little from your accident," he said. "When I fished you out of the river last night you looked so death-like that I was afraid we should

not be able to bring you round without difficulty."

Tears stood in my eyes as I took his hand. "Oh, sir, how brave, how noble it was of you to act as you did! You saved my life at the risk of your own, and how can I ever thank you enough?"

A bright colour came into his cheek as I spoke. "My dear Miss Holme, you must not speak in that way," he said. "What I did was a very ordinary thing. Any one else in my place would have done precisely the same. I must not claim more merit than is due for an action so simple."

"To you it may seem a simple thing to do, but I cannot forget that it was my life that you saved."

"What an old-fashioned princess it is!" said the major. "Why it must have been born a hundred years ago, and have had a fairy for its godmother. But here comes Deborah to tell us that breakfast is ready. Toasted bacon is better than pretty speeches, so come along with you, and make believe that you have

known each other for a twelvemonth at least."

Rose Cottage was a tiny place, and there were not wanting proofs that the major's income was commensurate with the scale of his establishment. A wise economy had to be a guiding rule in Major Strickland's life, otherwise Mr. George's college expenses would never have been met, and that young gentleman would not have had a proper start in life. Deborah was the only servant that the little household could afford; but then the major himself was gardener, butler, valet, and page in one. Thus—he cleaned the knives in a machine of his own invention; he brushed his own clothes; he lacquered his own boots, and at a pinch could mend them. He dug and planted his own garden, and grew enough potatoes and green-stuff to serve his little family the year round. In a little paddock behind his garden the major kept a cow; in the garden itself he had half a dozen hives; while not far away was a fowl-house that supplied him with more eggs than he could dispose of, except by sale. The major's maxim was, that the humblest

offices of labour could be dignified by a gentleman, and by his own example he proved the rule. What few leisure hours he allowed himself were chiefly spent with rod and line on the banks of the Adair.

George Strickland was an orphan, and had been adopted and brought up by his uncle since he was six years old. So far, the uncle had been able to supply the means for having him educated in accordance with his wishes. For the last three years George had been at one of the public schools, and now he was at home for a few weeks' holiday previously to going to Cambridge.

It will of course be understood that but a very small portion of what is here set down respecting Rose Cottage and its inmates was patent to me at that first visit; much of it, indeed, did not come within my cognizance till several years afterwards.

When breakfast was over the major lighted an immense meerschaum, and then invited me to accompany him over his little demesne. To a girl like me, whose life had been spent within

the four bare walls of a school-room, everything was fresh and everything was delightful. First to the fowl-house, then to the hives, and after that to see the brindled calf in the paddock, whose gambols and general mode of conducting himself were so utterly absurd that I laughed more in ten minutes after seeing him than I had done in ten years previously.

When we got back to the cottage, George was ready to take me on the river. The major went down with us and saw us safely aboard the *Water Lily*, bade us good-bye for an hour, and then went about his morning's business. I was rather frightened at first, the *Water Lily* was such a tiny craft, so long and narrow that it seemed to me as if the least movement on one side must upset it. But George showed me exactly where to sit, and gave me the tiller-ropes, with instructions how to manage them, and was himself so full of quiet confidence that my fears quickly died a natural death, and a sweet sense of enjoyment took their place.

We were on that part of the river which was below the weir, and as we put out from shore

the scene of my last night's adventure was clearly visible. There, spanning the river just above the weir, was the open-work timber bridge on which George was standing when my cry for help struck his ears. There was the weir itself, a sheet of foaming frothing water, that as it fell dashed itself in white-lipped passion against the rounded boulders that seemed striving in vain to turn it from its course. And here, a little way from the bottom of the weir, was the pool of quiet water over which our little boat was now cleaving its way, and out of which the handsome young man now sitting opposite to me had plucked me, bruised and senseless, only a few short hours ago. I shuddered and could feel myself turn pale as I looked. George seemed to read my thoughts; he smiled, but said nothing. Then bending all his strength to the oars, he sent the *Water Lily* spinning on her course. All my skill and attention were needed for the proper management of the tiller, and for a little while all morbid musings were banished from my mind.

Scarcely a word passed between us during the

next half hour, but I was too happy to care much for conversation. When we had gone a couple of miles or more, George pointed out a ruinous old house that stood on a dreary flat about a quarter of a mile from the river. Many years ago, he told me, that house had been the scene of a terrible murder, and was said to have been haunted ever since. Nobody would live in it; it was shunned as a place accursed, and was now falling slowly into decay and ruin. I listened to the story with breathless interest, and the telling of it seemed to make us quite old friends. After this there seemed no lack of subjects for conversation. George shipped his oars, and the boat was allowed to float lazily down the stream. He told about his school days, and I told about mine. The height of his ambition, he said, was to go into the army, and become a soldier like his dear old uncle. But Major Strickland wanted him to become a lawyer; and owing everything to his uncle as he did, it was impossible for him not to accede to his wishes. "Besides which," added George, with a sigh, "a commission is an expensive thing

to buy, and dear old uncle is anything but rich."

When we first set out that morning I think that George, from the summit of his eighteen years, had been inclined to look down upon me as a little school miss, whom he might patronize in a kindly sort of way, but whose conversation could not possibly interest a man of his sense and knowledge of the world. But whether it arose from that "old-fashioned" quality of which Major Strickland had made mention, which caused me to seem so much older than my years; or whether it arose from the genuine interest I showed in all he had to say; certain it is that long before we got back to Rose Cottage we were talking as equals in years and understanding, but that by no means prevented me from looking up to him in my own mind as to a being superior not only to myself but to the common run of humanity. I was sorry when we got back in sight of the weir, and as I stepped ashore I thought that this morning and the one I had spent with Sister Agnes in Charke Forest were the two happiest of my life.

I had no prevision that the fair-haired young man with whom I had passed three such pleasant hours would, in after years, influence my life in a way that just now I was far too much a child even to dream of.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GROWTH OF A MYSTERY.

We started at five o'clock to walk back to Dupley Walls, the major, and I, and George. It was only two miles away across the fields. I was quite proud to be seen in the company of so stately a gentleman as Major Strickland, who was dressed this afternoon as for a visit of ceremony. He had on a blue frock-coat tightly buttoned, to which the builder had imparted an intangible something that smacked undeniably of the vieux soldat. He wore a hat rather wide in the brim; a high stiff checked cravat; a white vest; and lacquered military boots, over which his tightly strapped trousers fell without a crease. He had white buckskin gloves, a stout silver-headed malacca cane, and carried a choice geranium in his button-hole.

There was not much conversation among us by the way. The major's usual flow of talk seemed to have deserted him this afternoon, and his mood seemed unconsciously to influence both George and me. Lady Pollexfen's threat to send me to a French school weighed down my spirits. I had found dear friends—Sister Agnes, the kind-hearted major, and his nephew, only to be torn from them—to be plunged back into the cold cheerless monotony of school-girl life, where there would be no one to love me, but many to find fault.

We went back by way of the plantation. George would not go any farther than the wicket at its edge, and it was agreed that he should there await the major's return from the Hall. "I hope, Miss Holme, that we shall see you at Rose Cottage again before many days are over," he said, as he took my hand to bid me farewell. "Uncle has promised to ask her ladyship to spare you for a few days."

"I shall be very, very glad to come, Mr. George. As long as I live I shall be in your debt, for I cannot forget that I owe you my life."

"The fairy godmother is whispering in her ear," said the major in a loud aside. "She talks like a woman of forty."

While still some distance away we could see Lady Pollexfen sunning herself on the western terrace. With a pang of regret I saw that Sister Agnes was not with her. The major quickened his pace; I clung to his hand, and felt without seeing that her ladyship's eyes were fixed upon me severely.

"I have brought back your wandering princess, my lady," said the major, in his cheery way, as he lifted his hat. Then, as he took her proffered hand, "I hope your ladyship is in perfect health."

"No princess, Major Strickland, but a base beggar brat," said Lady Pollexfen, without heeding his last words. "From the first moment of my seeing her I had a presentiment that she would cause me nothing but trouble and annoyance. That presentiment has been borne out by facts—by facts!" She nodded her head at the major, and rubbed one lean hand viciously within the other.

"Your ladyship forgets that the child herself is here. Pray consider her feelings."

"Were my feelings considered by those who sent her to Dupley Walls? I ought to have been consulted in the matter—to have had time given me to make fresh arrangements. It was enough to be burdened with the cost of her maintenance, without the added nuisance of having her before me as a continual eyesore. But I have arranged. Next week she leaves Dupley Walls for the Continent, and if I never see her face again, so much the better for both of us."

"With all due respect to your ladyship, it seems to me that your tone is far more bitter than the occasion demands. What may be the relationship between Miss Holme and yourself it is quite impossible for me to say; but that there is a tie of some sort between you I cannot for a moment doubt."

"And pray, Major Strickland, what reason may you have for believing that a tie of any kind exists between this young person and the mistress of Dupley Walls?"

"I will take my stand on one point: on the extraordinary resemblance which this child bears to——"

"To whom, Major Strickland?"

"To one who lies buried in Elvedon churchyard. You know whom I mean. Such a likeness is far too remarkable to be the result of accident."

"I deny the existence of any such likeness," said Lady Pollexfen, vehemently. "I deny it utterly. You are the victim of your own disordered imagination. Likeness, forsooth!" She laughed a bitter contemptuous laugh, and seemed to think that she had disposed of the question for ever.

"Come here, child," said the major, taking me kindly by the hand, and leading me close up to her ladyship. "Look at her, Lady Pollexfen," he added; "scan her features thoroughly, and tell me then that the likeness of which I speak is nothing more than a figment of my own brain."

Lady Pollexfen drew herself up haughtily. "To please you in a whim, Major Strickland, which I cannot characterize as anything but ridi-

culous, I will try to discover this fancied resemblance." Speaking thus, her ladyship carried her glass to her eye, and favoured me with a cold critical stare, under which I felt my blood boil with grief and indignation.

"Pshaw! Major Strickland, you are growing old and foolish. I cannot perceive the faintest trace of such a likeness as you mention. Besides, if it really did exist it would prove nothing. It would merely serve to show that there may be certain secrets within Dupley Walls which not even Major Strickland's well-known acumen can fathom."

"After that, of course I can only bid your ladyship farewell," said the offended major, with a ceremonious bow. Then turning to me: "Good-bye, my dear Miss Holme, for the present. Even at this, the eleventh hour, I must intercede with Lady Pollexfen to grant you permission to come and spend part of next week with us at Rose Cottage."

"Oh! take her, and welcome; I have no wish to keep her here. But you will stop to dinner, major, when we will talk of these things further.

And now, Miss Pest, you had better run away. You have heard too much already."

I was glad enough to get away, so after a hasty kiss to Major Strickland I hurried indoors, and once in my own bedroom, I burst into an uncontrollable fit of crying. How cruel had been Lady Pollexfen's words! and her looks had been more cruel than they.

I was still weeping when Sister Agnes came into the room. She had but just returned from Tydsbury. She knelt beside me, and took me in her arms and kissed me, and wiped away my tears. "Why was I crying?" she asked. I told her of all that Lady Pollexfen had said.

"Oh! cruel, cruel of her to treat you thus!" she said. "Can nothing move her—nothing melt that heart of adamant? But, Janet, dear, you must not let her sharp words wound you so deeply. Would that my love could shield you from such trials in future. But that cannot always be. You must strive to regard such things as part of that stern discipline of life which is designed to tutor our wayward hearts and rebellious spirits, and bring them into har-

mony with a will superior to our own. And now you must tell me all about your voyage down the Adair, and your rescue by that brave George Strickland. Ah! how grieved I was, when the news was brought to Dupley Walls, that I could not hasten to you, and see with my own eyes that you had come to no harm! But I was chained to my post, and could not stir."

Scarcely had Sister Agnes done speaking when the air was filled with a strain of music that seemed to be more sweet and solemn than anything I had ever heard before. All the soreness melted out of my heart as I listened; all my troubles seemed to take to themselves wings, and life to put on an altogether different aspect from any it had ever worn to me before. I saw clearly that I had not been so good a girl in many ways as I might have been. I would try my best not to be so inattentive at church in future, and I would never, no, not even on the coldest night in winter, neglect to say my prayers before getting into bed.

"What is it? Where does it come from?" I whispered into the ear of Sister Agnes.

"It is Father Spiridion playing the organ in the west gallery."

"And who is Father Spiridion?"

"A good man, and my friend. Presently you shall be introduced to him."

No word more was spoken till the playing ceased. Then Sister Agnes took me by the hand and we went towards the west gallery. Father Spiridion saw us, and paused on the top of the stairs.

"This is the child, holy father, of whom I have spoken to you once or twice; the child, Janet Holme."

The father's shrewd blue eyes took me in from head to foot at a glance. He was a tall, thin, and slightly cadaverous-looking man, with high aquiline features; and with an indefinable something about him that made me recognise him on the spot as a gentleman. He wore a coarse brown robe that reached nearly to his feet, the cowl of which was drawn over his head. When Sister Agnes had spoken he laid his hand gently on my head, and said something I could not understand. Then placing his hand under my

chin, he said, "Look me straight in the face, child."

I lifted my eyes and looked him fairly in the face, till his blue eyes lighted up with a smile. Then patting me on the cheek, he said, addressing Sister Agnes, "Nothing shifty there, at any rate. It is a face full of candour, and of that innocent fearlessness which childhood should always have, but too often loses in an evil world. I dare be bound now, little Janet, that thou art fond of sweetmeats?"

"Oh yes, sir, if you please."

"By some strange accident I find here in my *soutane* a tiny box of bonbons. They might have been put there expressly for a little sweet tooth of a Janet. Nothing could be more opportune. Take them, child, with Father Spiridion's blessing; and sometimes remember his name in thy prayers."

I did not see Father Spiridion again before I was sent away to school, but in after years our threads of life crossed and re-crossed each other strangely, in a way that neither he nor I even dreamed of at that first interview.

My life at Dupley Walls lengthened out from day to day, and in many ways I was exceedingly happy. My chief happiness lay in the love of dear Sister Agnes, with whom I spent at least one or two hours every day. Then I was very fond of Major Strickland, who, I felt sure, liked me in return—liked me for myself, and liked me still more, perhaps, for the strange resemblance which he said I bore to some dear one whom he had lost many long years before. Of George Strickland, too, I was very fond, but with a shy and diffident sort of liking. I held him as so superior to me in every way that I could only worship him from a distance. The major fetched me over to Rose Cottage several times. Such events were for me holidays in the true sense of the word. Another source of happiness arose from the fact that I saw very little of Lady Pollexfen. The indifference with which she had at first regarded me seemed to have deepened into absolute dislike. I was forbidden to enter her apartments, and I took care not to be seen by her when she was walking or riding out. I was sorry for her dislike, and yet glad that she dispensed with my

presence. I was far happier in the housekeeper's room, where I was treated like a little queen. Dance and I soon learned to love each other very heartily.

Those who have accompanied me thus far may not have forgotten the account of my first night at Dupley Walls, nor how frightened I was by the sound of certain mysterious footsteps in the room over mine. The matter was explained simply enough by Dance next day as a whim of Lady Pollexfen, who, for some reason best known to herself, chose that room out of all the big old house as the scene of her midnight perambulations. When therefore, on one or two subsequent occasions, I was disturbed in a similar way, I was no longer frightened, but only rendered sleepless and uncomfortable for the time being. I felt at such times, so profound was the surrounding silence, as if every living creature in the world, save Lady Pollexfen and myself, were asleep.

But before long that room over mine acquired for itself in my mind a new and dread significance. A consciousness gradually grew upon me that there was about it something quite out

of the common way; that its four walls held within themselves some grim secret, the rites appertaining to which were gone through when I and the rest of the uninitiated were supposed to be in bed and asleep. I cannot tell what it was that first made me suspect the existence of this secret. Certainly not the midnight walks of Lady Pollexfen. Perhaps a certain impalpable atmosphere of mystery, which, striking keenly on the sensitive nerves of a child, strung by recent events to a higher pitch than usual, broke down the first fine barrier that separates things common and of the earth earthy, from those dim intuitions which even the dullest of us feel at times of things spiritual and unseen. But however that may be, it so fell out that I, who at school had been one of the soundest of sleepers, had now become one of the worst. It often happened that I would awake in the middle of the night, even when there was no Lady Pollexfen to disturb me, and would so lie, sleepless, with wide-staring eyes, for hours, while all sorts of weird pictures would paint themselves idly in the waste nooks and corners of my brain. One

fancy I had, and for many nights I thought it nothing more than fancy, that I could hear soft and muffled footsteps passing up and down the staircase just outside my door; and that at times I could even faintly distinguish them in the room over mine, where, however, they never stayed for more than a few minutes at any one time.

In one of my daylight explorations about the old house I ventured up the flight of stairs that led from the landing outside my door to the upper rooms. At the top of these stairs I found a door that differed from every other door I had seen at Dupley Walls. In colour it was a dull dead black, and it was studded with large square-headed nails. It was without a handle of any kind, but was pierced by one tiny keyhole. To what strange chamber did this terrible door give access? and who was the mysterious visitor who came here night after night with hushed footsteps and alone? These were two questions that weighed heavily on my mind, that troubled me persistently when I lay awake in the dark, and even refused by day to be put entirely on one side.

By-and-by the mystery deepened. In a recess close to the top of the flight of stairs that led to the black door was an old-fashioned case clock. When this clock struck the hour two small mechanical figures dressed like German burghers of the sixteenth century came out of two little turrets, bowed gravely to each other, and then retired, like court functionaries, backwards. It was a source of great pleasure to me to watch these figures go through their hourly pantomime. But after a time it came into my head to wonder whether they did their duty by night as well as by day, whether they came out and bowed to each other in the dark, or waited quietly in their turrets till morning. In pursuance of this inquiry I got out of bed one night after Dance had left me, and relighted my candle. I knew that it was just on the stroke of eleven, and here was a capital opportunity for studying the customs of my little burghers by night. I stole up the staircase with my candle, and waited for the clock to strike. It struck, and out came the figures as usual.

"Perhaps they only came out because they saw my light," I said to myself. I felt that the question as to their mode of procedure in the dark was still an unsettled one.

But scarcely had the clock finished striking when I was disturbed by the shutting of a door downstairs. Fearing that some one was coming, and that the light might betray me, I blew out my candle and waited to hear more. But all was silent in the house. I turned to go down, but as I did so I saw with astonishment that a thin streak of light shone from under the black door. I stood like one petrified. Was there any one inside the room? Listening intently, I waited for full five minutes without stirring a limb. Silence the most profound upstairs and down. Stepping on tiptoe, I went back to my room, shut myself in, and crept gladly into bed.

Next night my curiosity over-mastered my fear. As soon as Dance was gone I crept upstairs in the dark. One peep was enough. As on the previous night, a thin streak of light shone from under the black door—evidence that

it was lighted up inside. Next night, and for several nights afterwards, I put the same plan in operation with precisely the same result. The light was always there.

Having my attention thus concentrated as it were upon this one room, and lying awake so many hours when I ought to have been asleep, my suspicions gradually merged into certainty that it was visited every midnight by some one who came and went so lightly and quietly that only by intently listening could I distinguish the exact moment of their passing my door. Who was this visitor that came and went so mysteriously? To discover this, without being myself discovered, was a matter that required both tact and courage, but it was one on which I was almost as much a monomaniac as a child well can be. To have opened my door when the landing was perfectly dark would have been to see nothing. To have opened the door with a candle in my hand would have been to betray myself. I must wait for a moonlight night, which would light up the landing sufficiently for my purpose. I waited. My opportunity came.

With my doorway in deep shadow, my door just sufficiently open for me to peer through, and with the staircase lighted up by the rays of the moon, I saw and recognised the mysterious midnight visitor to the room over mine. I saw and recognised Sister Agnes.

CHAPTER VII.

EXIT JANET HOLME.

The effect upon me of the discovery that Sister Agnes was the midnight visitor of the room over mine was at once to stifle that brood of morbid fancies with which of late both room and visitor had become associated in my mind. I loved her so thoroughly, she was to me so complete an embodiment of all that was noble and beautiful in womanhood, that however unsatisfying to my curiosity such visits might be, I could not doubt that she must have excellent reasons for making them. One thing was quite evident, that since she herself had said nothing respecting the room and her visits to it, it was impossible for me to question her on the matter. Such being the case, I felt that it would be a poor return for all her goodness to me to question Dance or any

other person respecting what she herself wished to keep concealed. Besides, it was doubtful whether Dance would tell me anything, even if I were to ask her. She had warned me a few hours after my arrival at Dupley Walls that there were many things under that roof respecting which I must seek no explanation; and with no one of the other domestics was I in any way intimate.

Still my curiosity remained unsatisfied; still over the room itself hung a veil of mystery which I would fain have lifted. All my visits to the room to see whether the light shone under the door had hitherto been made previously to the midnight visits of Sister Agnes. The question that now arose in my mind was whether the mysterious thread of light was or was not visible after Sister Agnes's customary visit—whether, in fact, it shone there all the night through. In order to solve this doubt I lay awake the night following that of my discovery of Sister Agnes. Listening intently, with my bedroom door ajar, I heard her go upstairs, and ten minutes later I could just distinguish her

smothered footfall as she came down. I heard the door at the bottom of the corridor shut behind her, and then I knew that I was safe.

Slipping out of bed, I stole, barefooted as I was, out of my bedroom and up the flight of stairs which led to the black door. Of ghosts in the ordinary meaning of that word—in the meaning which it has for five children out of six—I had no fear: my fears, such as they were, ran in quite another groove. I went upstairs slowly, with shut eyes, counting each stair as I put my feet on it from one up to ten. I knew that from the tenth stair the streak of light, if there, would be visible. On the tenth stair I opened my eyes. There was the thread of light shining clear and steady under the black door. For a minute I stood looking at it. In the intense silence the beating of my heart was painfully audible. Grasping the banister with one hand, I went down stairs backwards, step by step, and so regained the sanctuary of my own room.

I scarcely know in what terms to describe, or

how to make sufficiently clear, the strange sort of fascination there was for me in those nightly rambles—in living perpetually on the edge of a mystery. While daylight lasted the feeling slumbered within me; I could even take myself to task for wanting to pry into a secret that evidently in nowise concerned me. But as soon as twilight set in, and night's shadows began to creep timidly out of their corners, so surely could I feel the spell working within me, the desire creeping over me to pluck out the heart of the mystery that lay hidden behind the black nail-studded door upstairs. Sometimes I clomb the staircase at one hour, sometimes at another; but there was no real sleep for me, nothing but fitful uneasy dozes, till the brief journey had been made. After climbing to the tenth stair, and satisfying myself that the light was there, I would creep back noiselessly to bed, and fall at once into a deep dreamless sleep that was often prolonged till late in the forenoon.

At length there came a night when the secret was laid bare, and the spell broken for ever. I had been in bed for two hours and a half, lying in

that half-dreamy state in which facts and fancies are so inextricably jumbled together that it is too much labour to disintegrate the two, when the clock struck one. Next moment I was out of bed, standing with the handle of the half-opened door in my hand, listening to the silence. I had heard Sister Agnes come down some time ago, and I felt secure from interruption. To-night the moon shone brightly in through a narrow window in the gable, and all the way upstairs there was a track of white light as though a company of ghosts had lately passed that way. As I went upstairs I counted them up to the tenth, and then I stood still. Yes, the thread of light was there as it always was, only—only somehow it seemed broader to-night than I had ever noticed it as being before. It *was* broader. I could not be mistaken. While I was still pondering over this problem, and wondering what it might mean, my eye was taken by the dull gleam of some small white object about half way up the door. My eyes were taken by it, and would not leave it till I had ascertained what it really was. I ap-

proached it step by step, slowly, and then I saw that it was in reality that which I had imagined it to be. It was a small silver key—Sister Agnes's key—which she had forgotten to take away with her on leaving the room. Moreover the door was unlocked, having been simply pulled to by Sister Agnes on leaving, which explained why the streak of light showed larger than common.

I felt as though I were walking in a dream, so unreal did the whole business seem to me by this time. I was in a moonlight glamour; the influence of the silver orb was upon me. Of self-volition I seemed to have little or none left. I was given over to unseen powers, viewless, that dwell in space, of which we have ordinarily no human cognition. At such moments as these, and I have gone through many of them, I am no longer the Janet Holme of every-day life. I am lifted up and beyond my ordinary self. I obey a law whose beginning and whose ending I am alike ignorant of: but I feel that it is a law and not an impulse. I am led blindly forward, but I go unresistingly, feeling that

there is no power left in me save that of obeying.

Did I push open the door of the secret room, or was it opened for me by unseen hands? I know not. I only know that it closed noiselessly behind me of its own accord and left me standing there wondering, alone, with white face and staring eyes.

The chamber was a large one, or seemed so to me. It was draped entirely in black, hiding whatever windows there might be. The polished wood floor was bare. The ceiling was painted with a number of sprawling Cupids, some of them scattering flowers, others weaving leafy chaplets, presumably to crown the inane-looking goddess reclining in their midst on a bank of impossible cloud. But both Cupids and goddess were dingy with age, and seemed to have grown too old for such Arcadian revels.

The room was lighted with a dozen large wax candles placed in four silver tripods, each of them about six feet in height, and screwed to the floor to prevent their being overturned. All these preparations were not without an object. That

object was visible in the middle of the room. It was a large black coffin studded with silver nails, placed on a black slab about four feet in height, and more than half covered with a large pall.

I felt no fear at sight of this grim object. I was lifted too far above my ordinary self to be afraid. I simply wondered—wondered who lay asleep inside the coffin, and how long he or she had been there.

The only article of furniture in the room was a *prie-dieu* of black oak. I knelt on this, and gazed on the coffin, and wondered. My curiosity urged me to go up to it, and turn down the pall, and ascertain whether the name of the occupant was engraved on the lid. But stronger than my curiosity was a certain repugnance to go near it which I could not overcome. That some person was shut up there who during life had been of importance in the world, I could not doubt. This, too, was the room in which Lady Pollexfen took her midnight perambulations, and that coffin was the object she came to contemplate. Perhaps the occupant of the coffin came

out, and walked with my lady, and held ghostly converse with her on such occasions. I fancied that even now I could hear him breathing heavily, and turning over uneasily in his narrow bed. There seemed a rustling, too, among the folds of the sombre curtains as though some one were in hiding there; and that low faint sobbing sigh which quivered through the room, like an accent of unutterable sorrow, whence did it come? Others than myself were surely there, though I might not be able to see them.

I knelt on the *prie-dieu*, stirring neither hand nor foot; as immovable, in fact, except for my breathing, as a figure cut out of stone. Looking and wondering still, after a time it seemed to me that the lights were growing dimmer, that the room was growing colder; that some baleful presence was beside me with malicious intent to gradually numb and chill the life out of me, to freeze me, body and soul, till the two could no longer hold together; and that when morning came, if ever it did come to that accursed room, my husk would be there indeed, but Janet Holme herself would be gone for ever. A view-

less horror stirred my hair, and caused my flesh to creep. The baneful influence that was upon me was deepening in intensity; every minute that passed seemed to render me more powerless to break the spell. Suddenly the clock struck two. At the same moment a light footfall sounded on the stairs outside. It was Sister Agnes coming back to lock the door, and to fetch the key which she had left behind two hours before. I heard her approach the door, and I saw the door itself pulled close to; then the key was turned, the bolt shot into its place, the key was withdrawn, and I was left locked up alone in that terrible room.

But the proximity of another human being sufficed to break the spell under which I had been powerless only a minute before. Better risk discovery, better risk everything, than be left to pass the night where I was. Should that horror settle down upon me again, I felt that I must succumb to it. It would crush the life out of me as infallibly as though I were in the folds of some huge Python. Long before morning I should be dead.

I slid from off the *prie-dieu,* and walking backward, with my eyes glancing warily to right and left, I reached the door, and struck it with my fists. "Sister Agnes!" I cried, "Sister Agnes! do not leave me. I am here alone."

Again the curtains rustled, stirred by invisible fingers; again that faint long-drawn sigh ran like an audible shiver through the room. I heard eager fingers busy outside the door; a mist swam up before my eyes, and next moment I fainted dead away in the arms of Sister Agnes.

For three weeks after that time I lay very ill—lay very close to the edge of the grave. But for the ceaseless attentions and tender assiduities of Sister Agnes and Dance I should have slipped out of life and all my troubles. To them I owe it that I am now alive to write these lines. One bright afternoon, as I was approaching convalescence, Sister Agnes and I, sitting alone, got into conversation respecting the room upstairs, and my visit to it.

"But whose coffin is that, Sister Agnes?" I asked. "And why is it left there unburied?"

"It is the coffin of Sir John Pollexfen, her ladyship's late husband," answered Sister Agnes, very gravely. "He died thirteen years ago. By his will a large portion of the property left to his widow was contingent on his body being kept unburied and above ground for twenty years. Lady Pollexfen elected to have the body kept in that room which you were so foolish as to visit without permission; and there it will probably remain till the twenty years shall have expired. All these facts are well known to the household; indeed, to the country for miles around; but it was not thought necessary to mention them to a child like you, whose stay in the house would be of limited duration and to whom such knowledge could be of no possible benefit."

"But why do you visit the room every midnight, Sister Agnes?"

"It is the wish of Lady Pollexfen that, day and night, twelve candles shall be kept burning round the coffin, and ever since I came to reside at Dupley Walls it has been part of my duty to renew the candles once every twenty-four hours.

Midnight is the hour appointed for the performance of that duty."

"Do you not feel afraid to go there alone at such a time?"

"Dear Janet, what is there to be afraid of? The dead have no power to harm us. We shall be as they are in a very little while. They are but travellers who have gone before us into a far country, leaving behind them a few poor relics, and a memory that, if we have loved them, ought to make us look forward with desire to the time when we shall see them again."

Three weeks later I left Dupley Walls. Madame Duclos was in London for a week, and it was arranged that I should return to France with her. Major Strickland took me up to town and saw me safely into her hands. My heart was very sad at leaving all my dear new-found friends, but Sister Agnes had exhorted me to fortitude before I parted from her, and I knew that neither by her, nor the major, nor George, nor Dance, should I be forgotten. I saw Lady Pollexfen for a moment before leaving. She gave me two frigid fingers, and said that she

hoped I would be a good girl, and attend assiduously to my lessons, for that in after life I should have to depend upon my own industry for a living. I felt at the moment that I would much rather do that than have to depend through life on her ladyship's bounty.

A few tears would come when the moment arrived for me to say farewell to the major. He tried his best, in his hearty affectionate way, to cheer me up. I flung my arms round his neck and kissed him tenderly. He turned abruptly, seized his hat, and rushed from the room. Whereupon, Madame Duclos, who had been trying to look *sympathétique,* drew herself up, frowned, and pinched one of my ears viciously. Forty-eight hours later I was safely shut up in the Pension Clissot.

Here my personal narrative ends. From this point the story of which the preceding pages form a part, will be recorded by another pen. It was deemed advisable by those to whose opinion in such matters I bow without hesitation, that this narrative of certain events in the life of a child—a

necessary introduction to the narrative yet to come—should be written by the person whom it most concerned. Now that her task is done, she abnegates at once (and thankfully) the first person singular in favour of the third, and whatever is told of her in the following pages, is told not by herself, but by that other pen, of which mention is made above.

Between the time when this curtain falls and the next one draws up, there is a lapse of seven years.

CHAPTER VIII.

BY THE SCOTCH EXPRESS.

Among other passengers, on a certain fine spring morning, by the 10 a.m. Scotch express, was one who had been so far able to propitiate the guard as to secure a whole compartment to himself. He was enjoying himself in a quiet way—smoking, and skimming his papers, and taking a bird's-eye view now and again at the landscape that was flying past him at the rate of forty miles an hour. Few people who cared to speculate as to his profession would have hesitated to set him down as a military man, even had not the words, "Captain Ducie," painted in white letters on a black portmanteau which protruded half-way from under his seat, rendered any such speculation needless. He must have been three or four-and-forty years old, judging from the lines about his mouth and eyes, but in some other respects

he looked considerably younger. He wore neither beard nor whiskers, but his short hair, and his thick, drooping moustache were both jet black, and betrayed as yet, thanks either to Nature or Art, none of those straggling streaks of silver which tell so plainly of the advance of years. He had a clear olive complexion, a large aquiline nose, and deepset eyes, piercing, and full of fire, under a grand sweep of eyebrow. In person he was tall and thin; broad-chested, but lean in the flank, with hands and feet that looked almost effeminate, so small were they in comparison with his size. A black frock-coat, tightly buttoned, set off to advantage a figure of which he might still be reasonably proud. The remainder of his costume was in quiet keeping with the first fashion of the period.

Captain Ducie smoked and read and stared out of the window much as eleven out of twelve of us would do under similar circumstances, while milepost after milepost flashed out for an instant and was gone. After a time he took a letter out of his breast pocket, opened it, and read it. It was brief, and ran as under:—

"Stapleton, Scotland,
"March 31st.

"My Dear Ned,—Since you wish it, come down here for a few weeks; whether to recruit your health or your finances matters not. Mountain air and plain living are good for both. However, I warn you beforehand that you will find us very dull. Lady B.'s health is hardly what it ought to be, and we are seeing no company just now. If you like to take us as we are, I say again—come.

"As for the last paragraph of your letter, I scarcely know in what terms to answer it. You have already bled me so often the same way, that I have grown heartily sick of the process. This must be the last time of asking, my boy; I wish you clearly to understand that. This place has cost me a great deal of money of late, and I cannot spring you more than a hundred. For that amount I enclose you a cheque. *Finis coronat opus.* Bear those words in mind, and believe me when I say that you have had your last cheque

"From your affectionate cousin,

"Barnstake."

"Consummate little prig!" murmured Captain Ducie to himself as he refolded the letter, and put it away. "I can fancy the smirk on his face as he penned that precious effusion, and how, when he had finished it, he would trot off to his clothes-prop of a wife and ask her whether she did not think it at once amusing and severe. That letter shall cost your lordship fifty guineas. I don't allow people to write to me in that style with impunity."

He lighted another cigar frowningly. "I wonder if I was ever so really hard up as I am now," he continued to himself. "I don't think I ever was quite. I have been in Queer Street many a time, but I've always found a friend round the corner, or have pulled myself through by the skin of the teeth somehow. But this time I see no lift in the cloud. My insolvency has become chronic; it is attacking the very citadel of life. I have not a single uncle or aunt to fall back upon. The poor creatures are all dead and buried, and their money all spent. Well!—Outlaw is an ugly word, but it is one that I shall have to learn how to spell before long. I shall

have to leave my country for my country's good." He puffed away fiercely for a little while, and then he resumed. "It would not be a bad thing for a fellow like me to become a chief among the Red Skins—if they would have me. With them my lack of pence would be no bar to success. I can swim, and shoot, and ride: although I cannot paint a picture, I daresay that I could paint myself; and I know several fellows whose scalps I should have much pleasure in taking. As for the so-called amenities of civilized life, what are they worth to one who, like me, has no longer the means of enjoying them? After all, it is a question whether freedom and the prairie would not be preferable to Pall-Mall and a limited income of, say—twelve hundred a year—the sort of income that is just enough to make one the slave of society, but is not sufficient to pay for gilding its fetters. A station, by Jove! and with it the possibility of getting a drop of cognac."

As soon as the train came to a stand, Captain Ducie vacated his seat and went in search of the refreshment-room. On coming back five minutes

later, he was considerably disgusted to find that he was no longer to have his compartment to himself. The seat opposite to that on which he had been sitting was already occupied by a gentleman who was wrapped up to the nose in rugs and furs.

"Any objection to smoking?" asked the captain presently as the train began to move. He was pricking the end of a fresh cigar as he asked the question. The words might be civil, but the tone was offensive; it seemed to convey—"I don't care whether you object or not: I intend to enjoy my weed all the same."

The stranger, however, seemed in nowise offended. He smirked and quavered two yellow gloved fingers out of his furs. "Oh, no, certainly not," he said. "I too am a smoker and shall join you presently." He spoke with the slightest possible foreign accent, just sufficient to tell an educated ear that he was not an Englishman. If Captain Ducie's features were aquiline, those of the stranger might be termed vulturine—long, lean, narrow, with a thin high-ridged nose, and a chin that was pointed with a tuft of thick

black hair. Except for this tuft he was clean shaven. His black hair, cropped close at back and sides, was trained into an elaborate curl on the top of the forehead and there fixed with *cosmétique*. Both hair and chin-tuft were of that uncompromising blue-black which tells unmistakably of the dye-pot. His skin was yellow and parchment-like, and stretched tightly over his forehead and high cheek bones, but puckering into a perfect network of lines about a mouth whose predominant expression was one of mingled cynicism and suspicion. There was suspicion, too, in his small black eyes, as well as a sort of lurking fierceness which not even his most urbane and elaborate smile could altogether eliminate. In person he was very thin and somewhat under the middle height, and had all the air of a confirmed valetudinarian. He was dressed as no English gentleman would care to be seen dressed in public. A long brown velvet coat trimmed with fur; lavender-coloured trowsers tightly strapped over patent leather boots; two or three vests of different colours under one made of the skin of some animal and fastened

with gold buttons; a profusion of jewellery; an embroidered shirt-front and deep turn-down collar: such were the chief items of his attire. A hat with a very curly brim hung from the carriage roof, while for present head-gear he wore a sealskin travelling cap with huge lappets that came below his ears. In this cap, and wrapped to the chin in his bear-skin rug, he looked like some newly-discovered species of animal—a sort of cross between a vulture and a monkey, were such a thing possible, combining the deep-seated fierceness of the one with the fantastic cunning, and the impossibility of doing the most serious things without a grimace, of the other.

No sooner had Captain Ducie lighted his cigar than with an impatient movement he put down the window close to which he was sitting. It had been carefully put up by the stranger while Ducie was in the refreshment room; but the latter was a man who always studied his own comfort before that of any one else, except when self whispered to him that such a course was opposed to his own interests,

which was more than he could see in the present case.

The stranger gave a little sniggering laugh as the window fell noisily; then he shivered and drew his furs more closely around him. "It is strange how fond you English people are of what you call fresh air," he said. "In Italy fresh air may be a luxury, but it cannot be had in your hang-dog climate without one takes a catarrh at the same time."

Captain Ducie surveyed him coolly from head to foot for a moment or two. Then a sudden thought seemed to strike him. "I must really ask you to pardon my rudeness," he said, lifting his Glengarry. "If the open window is the least annoyance to you, by all means let it be shut. To me it is a matter of perfect indifference." As he spoke he pulled the window up, and then he turned on the stranger with a look that seemed to imply: "Although I seemed so truculent a few minutes ago, you see what a good-natured fellow I am at heart." In most of Captain Ducie's actions there was some ulterior motive at work, however

trivial many of his actions might appear to an outsider, and in the present case it was not likely that he acted out of mere complaisance to a man whom he had never seen nor heard of ten minutes previously.

"You are too good—really far too good," said the stranger. "Suppose we compromise the matter?" With that his lean hands, encased in lemon-coloured gloves, let down the window a couple of inches, and fixed it there with the strap.

"Now really, you know, do just as you like about it," said the captain, with that slow amused smile which became his face so well. "As I said before, I am altogether indifferent in the matter."

"As it is now, it will suit both of us, I think. And now to join you in your smoke."

From the net over his head he reached down a small mahogany case. This he opened, and from it extracted a large meerschaum pipe elaborately mounted with gold filigree work. Having charged the pipe from an embroidered

pouch filled with choice Turkish tobacco, he struck an allumette and began to smoke.

"Decidedly an acquaintance worth cultivating," murmured the captain under his breath. "But what country does the beggar belong to?" A question more easily asked than answered: at all events, it was one which the captain found himself unable to solve to his own satisfaction. For a few minutes they smoked in silence.

"Do you travel far, to-day?" asked the stranger at length. "Are you going across the Border?"

"The end of my journey is Stapleton, Lord Barnstake's place, and not a great way from Edinbro'. Shall I have the pleasure of your company as far as I go by rail?"

"Ah, no, sir, not so far as that. Only to ——. There I must leave you, and take the train for Windermere. I live on the banks of your beautiful lake. Permettez-moi, monsieur," and with a movement that was a combination of a shrug, a grimace, and a bow, the stranger drew a card-case from one of his pockets, and extracting a card therefrom, handed it to Ducie.

The captain took it with a bow, and sticking his glass in his eye, read:

M. Paul Platzoff.

Bon Repos,
Windermere.

The captain in return handed over his pasteboard credential, and this solemn rite being accomplished conversation was resumed on more easy and agreeable terms.

"I dare say you are puzzling your brains as to my nationality," said Platzoff with a smile. "I am not an Englishman; that you can tell from my accent. I am not a Frenchman, although I write 'monsieur' before my name. Still less am I either a German or an Italian. Neither am I a genuine Russian, although I look to Russia as my native country. In brief, my father was a Russian, my mother was a Frenchwoman, and I was born on board a merchantman during a gale of wind in the Baltic."

"Then I should call you a true cosmopolitan—a genuine citizen of the world," remarked Ducie, who was amused with his new friend's frankness.

"In ideas I strive to be such, but it is difficult at all times to overcome the prejudices of education and early training," answered Platzoff. "You, sir, are, I presume, in the army?"

"Formerly I was in the army, but I sold out nearly a dozen years ago," answered Ducie, drily. "Does this fellow expect me to imitate his candour?" thought the captain. "Would he like to know all about my grandfather and grandmother, and that I have a cousin who is an earl? If so, I am afraid he will be disappointed.

"Did you see much service while you were in the army?" asked Platzoff.

"I saw a good deal of hard fighting in the East, although not on any large scale." Ducie was beginning to get restive. He was not the sort of man to quietly allow himself to be catechized by a stranger.

"I too know something of the East," said

Platzoff. "Three of the happiest years of my life were spent in India. While out there I became acquainted with several gentlemen of your profession. With Colonel Leslie I was particularly intimate. I had been stopping with the poor fellow only a few days before that gallant affair at Ruckapore, in which he came by his death."

"I remember the affair you speak of," said Ducie. "I was in one of the other presidencies at the time it happened."

"There was another officer in poor Leslie's regiment with whom I was also on very intimate terms. He died of cholera a little later on, and I attended him in his last moments. I allude to a Captain Charles Pollexfen. Did you ever meet with him in your travels?"

Captain Ducie's swarthy cheek deepened its hue. He paused to blow a speck of cigar ash off his sleeve before he spoke. "I did not know your Captain Charles Pollexfen," he said, in slow deliberate accents. "Till the present moment I never heard of his existence."

Captain Ducie pulled his Glengarry over his

brows, folded his arms, and shut his eyes. He had evidently made up his mind for a quiet snooze. Platzoff regarded him with a silent snigger. "Something I have said has pricked the gallant captain under his armour," he muttered to himself. "Is it possible that he and Pollexfen were acquainted with each other in India? But what matters it to me if they were?"

When M. Platzoff had smoked his meerschaum to the last whiff, he put it carefully away, and disposed himself to follow Ducie's example in the matter of sleep. He rearranged his wraps, folded his arms, shut his eyes, and pressed his head resolutely against the cushion; but at the end of five minutes he opened his eyes, and seemed just as wakeful as before. "These beef-fed Englishmen seem as if they can sleep whenever and wherever they choose. Enviable faculty! I daresay the heifers on which they gorge possess it in almost as great perfection."

Hidden away among his furs was a small morocco-covered despatch-box. This he now proceeded to unlock, and to draw from it a

folded paper which, on being opened, displayed a closely-written array of figures, as though it were the working out of some formidable problem in arithmetic. Platzoff smiled, and his smile was very different from his cynical snigger, as his eyes ran over the long array of figures. "I must try and get this finished as soon as I am back at Bon Repos," he muttered to himself. "I am frightened when I think what would happen if I were to die before its completion. My great secret would die with me, and perhaps hundreds of years would pass away before it would be brought to light. What a discovery it would be! To those concerned it would seem as though they had found the key-note of some lost religion—as though they had penetrated into some temple dedicated to the gods of Eld."

His soliloquy was suddenly interrupted by three piercing shrieks from the engine, followed by a terrible jolting and swaying of the carriage, which made it almost impossible for those inside to keep their seats. Captain Ducie was alive to the danger in a moment. One glance out of the window was enough. "We are off the line!

Hold fast!" he shouted to Platzoff, drawing up his legs, and setting his teeth, and looking very fierce and determined. M. Platzoff tried to follow his English friend's example. His yellow complexion faded to a sickly green. With eyes in which there was no room now for anything save anguish and terror unspeakable, he yet snarled at the mouth and showed his teeth like a wolf brought hopelessly to bay.

The swaying and jolting grew worse. There was a grinding and crunching under the wheels of the carriage as though a thousand huge coffee-mills were at work. Suddenly the train parted in the middle, and while the forepart, with the engine, went ploughing through the ballast till brought up in safety a few hundred yards further on, the carriage in which were Ducie and Platzoff, together with the hinder part of the train, went toppling over a high embankment, and crashing down the side, and rolling over and over, came to a dead stand at the bottom, one huge mass of wreck and disaster.

Captain Edmund Ducie was one of the first to emerge from the wreck. He crept out of the

broken window of the crushed-up carriage, and shook himself as a dog might have done. "Once more a narrow squeak for life," he said, half aloud. "If I had been worth ten thousand a year, I should infallibly have been smashed. Not being worth ten brass farthings, here I am. What has become of my little Russian, I wonder?"

CHAPTER IX.

AT THE "GOLDEN GRIFFIN."

No groan or cry emanated from that portion of the broken carriage out of which Captain Ducie had just crept. Could it be possible that Platzoff was killed? With considerable difficulty Ducie managed to wrench open the smashed door. Then he called the Russian by name; but there was no answer. He could discern nothing inside save a confused heap of rugs and minor articles of luggage. Under these, enough in themselves to smother him, Platzoff must be lying. One by one these articles were fished out of the carriage, and thrown aside by Ducie. Last of all he came to Platzoff, lying in a heap, white and insensible, like one already dead. Putting forth all his great strength, Ducie lifted the senseless body out of the carriage as care-

fully and tenderly as though it were that of a new-born child. He then saw that the Russian was bleeding from an ugly jagged wound at the back of his head. There was no trace of any other outward hurt. A faint pulsation of the heart told that he was still alive. On looking round, Ducie saw that there was a large country tavern only a few hundred yards from the scene of the accident. Towards this house, which announced itself to the world under the title of "The Golden Griffin," he now hastened with long measured strides, carrying the still insensible Russian in his arms. In all, some half-dozen carriages had come over the embankment. The shrieks and cries of the wounded passengers were something appalling. Already the passengers in the fore part of the train, who had escaped unhurt, together with the officials and a few villagers who happened to be on the spot, were doing their best to rescue these unfortunates from the terrible wreckage in which they were entangled.

Captain Ducie was the first man from the accident to cross the threshold of the "Golden

Griffin." He demanded to be shown the best spare room in the house. On the bed in this room he laid the body of the still insensible Platzoff. His next act was to despatch a mounted messenger for the nearest doctor. Then, having secured the services of a brisk steady-nerved chambermaid, he proceeded to dress the wound as well as the means at his command would allow of—washing it, and cutting away the hair, and, by means of some ice, which he was fortunate enough to procure, succeeding in all but stopping the bleeding, which, to a man so frail of body, so reduced in strength as Platzoff, would soon have been fatal. A teaspoonful of brandy administered at brief intervals did its part as a restorative, and some minutes before the doctor's arrival Ducie had the satisfaction of seeing his patient's eyes open, and of hearing him murmur faintly a few soft guttural words in some language which the captain judged to be his native Russ.

Platzoff had quite recovered his senses by the time the doctor arrived, but was still too feeble to do more than whisper a few unconnected

words. There were many claimants this forenoon on the doctor's attention, and the services required by Platzoff at his hands had to be performed as expeditiously as possible.

"You must make up your mind to be a guest of the 'Golden Griffin' for at least a week to come," he said as he took up his hat preparatory to going. "With quiet, and care, and a strict adherence to my instructions, I daresay that by the end of that time you will be sufficiently recovered to leave here for your own home. Humanly speaking, sir, you owe your life to this gentleman," indicating Ducie. "But for his skill and promptitude, you would have been a dead man before I reached you."

Platzoff's thin white hand was extended feebly. Ducie took it in his sinewy palms and pressed it gently. "You have this day done for me what I can never forget," whispered the Russian, brokenly. Then he closed his eyes, and seemed to sink off into a sleep of exhaustion.

Leaving strict injunctions with the chambermaid not to quit the room till he should come back, Captain Ducie went downstairs with the

intention of revisiting the scene of the disaster. He called in at the bar to obtain his favourite "thimbleful" of cognac, and there he found a very agreeable landlady with whom he got into conversation respecting the accident. Some five minutes had passed thus when he was touched on the shoulder by the chambermaid. "If you please, sir, the foreign gentleman has woke up, and is anxiously asking to see you."

With a shrug of the shoulders, and a slight lowering of his black eyebrows, Captain Ducie went back upstairs. Platzoff's eager eyes fixed him as he entered the room. Ducie sat down close by the bed, and said in a kindly tone: "What is it? What can I do for you? Command me in any way."

"My servant—where is he? And—and my despatch box. Valuable papers. Try to find it."

Ducie nodded and left the room. The inquiries he made soon elicited the fact that Platzoff's servant had been even more severely injured than his master, and was at that moment lying, more dead than alive, in a little room up-

stairs. Slowly and musingly, with hands in pocket, Captain Ducie then took his way towards the scene of the accident. "It may suit my book very well to make friends with this Russian," he thought as he went along. "He is no doubt very rich, and I am very poor. In us the two extremes meet, and form the perfect whole. He might serve my purposes in more ways than one, and it is just as likely that his purposes might be served by me: for a man like that must have purposes that want serving. Nous verrons. Meanwhile, I am his obedient servant to command."

Captain Ducie, hunting about among the débris of the train, was not long in finding the fragments of M. Platzoff's despatch box. Its contents were scattered about. Ducie spent ten minutes in gathering together the various letters and documents which it had contained. Then, with the broken box under his arm, and the papers in his hands, he went back to the Russian.

He showed the papers one by one to Platzoff, who was strangely eager in the matter. When Ducie held up the last of them, Platzoff groaned

and shut his eyes. "They are all there as far as I can judge," he murmured, "except the most important one of all—a paper covered with figures, of no use to any one but myself. Oh, dear Captain Ducie! do please go once more and try to find the one that is still missing. If I only knew that it was burnt, or torn into fragments, I should not mind so much. But if it were to fall into the hands of a scoundrel skilful enough to master the secret which it contains, then I——." He stopped with a scared look on his face, as though he had unwittingly said more than he had intended.

"Pray don't trouble yourself with any explanations just now," said Ducie. "You want the paper: that is enough. I will go and have a thorough hunt for it."

Back went Ducie to the broken carriages, and began to search more carefully than before. "What can be the nature of the great secret, I wonder, that is hidden between the Sibylline leaves I am in search of? If what Platzoff's words implied be true, he who learns it is master of the situation. Would that it were known to me!"

Slowly and carefully, inside and out of the carriage in which he and Platzoff had travelled, Captain Ducie conducted his search. One by one he again turned over the wraps and different articles of personal luggage belonging to both of them, which had not yet been removed. The first object that rewarded his search was a splendid diamond pin which he remembered having seen in Platzoff's scarf. Ducie picked it up and looked cautiously around. No one was regarding him. "Of the first water, and worth a hundred guineas at the very least," he muttered. Then he put it in his waistcoat pocket, and went on with his search.

A minute or two later, hidden away under one of the cushions of the carriage, he found what he was looking for: a folded sheet of thick blue paper covered with a complicated array of figures —that and nothing more.

Captain Ducie regarded the recovered treasure with a strange mixture of feelings. His hands trembled slightly; his heart was beating more quickly than usual; his eyes seemed to see and yet not to see the paper in his hands. Like one mazed and in deep doubt he stood.

His reverie was broken by the approach of some of the railway officials. The cloud vanished from before his eyes, and he was his cool imperturbable self in a moment. Heading the long array of figures on the parchment were a few lines of ordinary writing, written, however, not in English, but Italian. These few lines Ducie now proceeded to read over more attentively than he had done at the first glance. He was sufficiently master of Italian to be able to translate them without much difficulty. Translated they ran as under:—

"Bon Repos,
"Windermere.

"CARLO MIO,—In the Amsterdam edition of 1698 of *The Confessions of Parthenio the Mystic* occur the passages given below. To your serious consideration, O! friend of my heart, I recommend these words. To read them, much patience is required. But they are freighted with wisdom, as you will discover long before you reach the end of them, and have a deep significance for that Great Cause to which the souls of both of us are knit by bonds which in this life can never

be severed. When you read these lines, the hand that writes them will be cold in the grave. But Nature allows nothing to be lost, and somewhere in the wide universe the better part of me (the mystic Ego) will still exist; and if there be any truth in the doctrine of the Affinity of Souls, then shall you and I meet again elsewhere. Till that time shall come—Adieu!

"Thine,

"PAUL PLATZOFF."

Having carefully read these lines twice over, Captain Ducie refolded the paper, put it away in an inner pocket, and buttoned his coat over it. Then he took his way, deep in thought, back to the "Golden Griffin."

The Russian's eager eyes asked him "What success?" before he could say a word.

"I am sorry to say that I have not been able to find the paper," said Captain Ducie in slow deliberate tones. "I have found something else—your diamond pin, which you appear to have lost out of your scarf."

Platzoff gazed at him with a sort of blank

despair on his saffron face, but a low moan was his only reply. Then he turned his face to the wall and shut his eyes.

Captain Ducie was a patient man, and he waited without speaking for a full hour. At the end of that time Platzoff turned, and held out a feeble hand. "Forgive me, my friend, if you will allow me to call you so," he said. "I must seem horribly ungrateful after all the trouble I have put you to, but I do not feel so. The loss of my MS. affected me so deeply for a little while that I could think of nothing else. I shall get over it by degrees."

"If I remember rightly," remarked Ducie, "you said that the lost MS. was merely a complicated array of figures. Of what possible value can it be to any one who may chance to find it?"

"Of no value whatever," answered Platzoff, "unless they who find it should also be skilful enough to discover the key by which alone it can be read; for, as I may now tell you, there is a hidden meaning in the figures. The finders may or may not make that discovery, but how

am I to ascertain what is the fact either one way or the other? For want of such knowledge my sense of security will be gone. I would almost prefer to know for certain that the MS. had been read than be left in utter doubt on the point. In the one case I should know what I had to contend against, and could take proper precautionary measures; in the other, I am left to do battle with a shadow that may or may not be able to work me harm."

"Would possession of the information that is contained in the MS. enable any one to work you harm?"

"It would to this extent, that it would put them in possession of a cherished secret, which .... but why talk of these things? What is done cannot be undone. I can only prepare myself for the worst."

"One moment," said Ducie. "I think that after the thorough search made by me the chances are twenty to one against the MS. ever being found. But granting that it does turn up, the finder of it will probably be some ignorant navvie or incurious official, without either

inclination or ability to master the secret of the cipher."

Ten days later M. Platzoff was sufficiently recovered to set out for Bon Repos. At his earnest request Ducie had put off his own journey to stay with him. At another time the ex-captain might not have cared to spend ten days at a forlorn country tavern, even with a rich Russian; but, as he often told himself, he had "his book to make," and he probably looked upon this as a necessary part of the process. Before they parted it was arranged that as soon as Ducie should return from Scotland he should go and spend a month at Bon Repos. Then the two shook hands, and each went his own way. As one day passed after another without bringing any tidings of the lost MS., Platzoff's anxiety respecting it seemed to lessen, and by the time he left the "Golden Griffin" he had apparently ceased to trouble his mind any further in the matter.

CHAPTER X.

THE STOLEN MANUSCRIPT.

Captain Edmund Ducie came of a good family. His people were people of mark among the landed gentry of their county, and were well to do even for their position. Although only a fourth son his allowance had been a very handsome one, both while at Cambridge and afterwards during the early years of his life in the army. When of age, he had come into the very nice little fortune, for a fourth son, of nine thousand pounds; and it was known that there would be "something handsome" for him at his father's death. He had a more than ordinary share of good looks; his mind was tolerably cultivated, and afterwards enlarged by travel and service in various parts of the world; in manners and address he was a finished gentleman of the modern "swell"

school. Yet all these advantages of nature and fortune were in a great measure nullified and rendered of no avail by reason of one fatal defect, of one black speck at the core. In a word, Captain Ducie was a born gambler.

He had gambled when a child in the nursery, or had tried to gamble, for cakes and toys. He had gambled when at school for coppers, pocket-knives, and marbles. He had gambled when at the University, and had felt the claws of the Children of Usury. He gambled away his nine thousand pounds, or such remainder of it as had not been forestalled, when he came of age. Later on, when in the army, and on home allowance again, for his father would not let him starve, he had kept on gambling; so that when, some five years later, his father died, and he dropped in for the "something handsome," two-thirds of it had to be paid down on the nail to make a free man of him again. On the remaining one-third he contrived to keep afloat for a couple of years longer; then, after a season of heavy losses, came the final crash, and Captain Ducie found himself

under the necessity of selling his commission, and of retiring into private life.

From this date Captain Ducie was compelled to live by "bleeding" his friends and connexions. He was a great favourite among them, and they rallied gallantly to his rescue. But Ducie still gambled; and the best of friends, and the most indulgent of relatives, grew tired after a time of seeing their cherished gold pieces slip heedlessly through the fingers of the man whom it was intended that they should substantially help, and be lost in the foul gutter of a gaming-house. One by one friend and relative dropped away from the doomed man till none were left. Little by little the tide of fortune ebbed away from his feet, leaving him stranded high and dry on the cruel shore of impecuniosity, hemmed in by a thousand debts, with the gaunt wolf of beggary staring him in the face.

There was one point about Captain Ducie's gambling that redounded to his credit. No one ever suspected him of cheating. His "run of luck" was so uniformly bad, despite a brief fickle gleam of fortune now and again, which

seemed sent only to lure him on to deeper destruction; it was so well known that he had spent two fortunes and alienated all his friends through his passion for the green cloth; that it would have been the height of absurdity to even suspect him of roguery. Indeed, "Ducie's luck" was a proverbial phrase at the whist-tables of his club. He was not a "turf" man, and had no knowledge of horses beyond that legitimate knowledge which every soldier ought to have. His money had all been lost either at cards or roulette. He was one of the most imperturbable of gamblers. Whatever the varying chances of the game might be, no man ever saw him either elated or depressed: he fought with his vizor down.

No man could be more aware of his one besetting weakness, nor of his inability to conquer it, than was Captain Ducie. When he could no longer muster five pounds to gamble with, he would gamble with five shillings. There was a low public-house in Southwark to which, poorly dressed, he sometimes went when his funds were low. Here, unknown to the police,

a little quiet gambling for small stakes went on from night to night. But however small might be the amount involved, there was the passion, the excitement, the gambling contagion, precisely as at Homburg or Baden; and these it was that made the very salt of Captain Ducie's life.

About six months before we made his acquaintance he had been compelled to leave his pleasant suite of apartments in New Bond-street, and had, since that time, been the tenant of a shabby bedroom in a shabby little out-of-the-way street. When in town he took his meals at his club, and to that address all letters and papers for him were sent. But of late even the purlieus of his club had become dangerous ground. Round the palatial portal duns seemed to hover and flit mysteriously, so that the task of reaching the secure haven of the smoke-room was one of danger and difficulty; while the return voyage to the shabby little bedroom in the shabby little street could be accomplished in safety only by frequent tacking, and much skilful pilotage, to avoid running foul of various rocks and quicksands by the way.

But now, after a six weeks' absence in Scotland, Captain Ducie felt that for a day or two at least he was tolerably safe. He felt like an old fox venturing into the open after the noise of the hunt has died away in the distance, who knows that for a little while he is safe from molestation. How delightful town looked, he thought, after the dull life he had been leading at Stapleton. He had managed to screw another fifty pounds out of Barnstake, and this very evening, the first of his return, he would go to Tom Dawson's rooms and there refresh himself with a little quiet faro or chicken-hazard: very quiet it must of necessity be unless he saw that it was going to turn out one of his lucky evenings, in which case he would try to "put up" the table and finish with a fortunate coup. But there was one little task that he had set himself to do before going out for the evening, and he proceeded to consider it over while discussing his cup of strong green tea and his strip of dry toast. To aid him in considering the matter he brought out of an inner pocket the stolen manuscript of M. Platzoff.

While in Scotland, when shut up in his own room of a night, he had often exhumed the MS., and had set himself seriously to the task of deciphering it, only to acknowledge at the end of a terrible half-hour that he was ignominiously beaten. Whereupon he would console himself by saying that such a task was "not in his line," that his brains were not of that pettifogging order which would allow of his sitting down with the patience requisite to master the secret of the figures. To-night, for the twentieth time, he brought out the MS. He again read the prefatory note carefully over, although he could almost have said it by heart, and once more his puzzled eyes ran over the complicated array of figures, till at last, with an impatient "Pish!" he flung the MS. to the other side of the table, and poured out for himself another cup of tea.

"I must send it to Bexell," he said to himself. "If anybody can make it out, he can. And yet I don't like making another man as wise as myself in such a matter. However, there is no help for it in the present case. If I keep the MS. by me till doomsday I shall never

succeed in making out the meaning of those confounded figures."

When he had finished his tea he took out his writing-desk and wrote as under:

"My dear Bexell,—I have only just got back from Scotland after an absence of six weeks. I have brought with me a severe catarrh, a new plaid, a case of Mountain Dew, and a MS. written in cipher. The first and second of these articles I retain for my own use. Of the third I send you half a dozen bottles by way of sample: a judicious imbibition of the contents will be found to be a sovereign remedy for the Pip and other kindred disorders that owe their origin to a melancholy frame of mind. The fourth article on my list I send you bodily. It has been lent to me by a friend of mine who states that he found it in his muniment chest among a lot of old title deeds, leases, &c., the first time he waded through them after coming into possession of his property. Neither he nor any friend to whom he has shown it can make out its meaning, and I must confess to being myself one of the puzzled.

My friend is very anxious to have it deciphered, as he thinks it may in some way relate to his property, or to some secret bit of family history with which it would be advisable that he should become acquainted. Anyhow, he gave it to me to bring to town, with a request that I would seek out some one clever in such things, and try to get it interpreted for him. Now I know of no one except yourself who is at all expert in such matters. You, I remember, used to take a delight that to me was inexplicable in deciphering those strange advertisements which now and again appear in the newspapers. Let me therefore ask of you to bring your old skill to bear in the present case, and if you can make me anything like a presentable translation to send back to my friend the laird, you will greatly oblige

"Your friend,

"E. Ducie."

The MS. consisted of three or four sheets of deed-paper fastened together at one corner with silk. The prefatory note was on the first sheet. This first sheet Ducie cut away with his penknife

and locked up in his desk. The remaining sheets he sent to his friend Bexell, together with the note which he had written.

Three days later Mr. Bexell returned the sheets with his reply. In order properly to understand this reply it will be necessary to offer to the reader's notice a specimen of the MS. The conclusions arrived at by Mr. Bexell, and the mode by which he reached them, will then be more clearly comprehensible.

The following is a counterpart of the first few lines of the MS.:

253.12	59.25	14.5	96.14	158.49	1.29	465.1	28.53
4	1	6	10	4	12	9	1
16.36	151.18	58.7	14.29	368.1	209.18	43.11	1.31	1.1
11	3						9	8
29.6	186.9	204.11	86.19	43.16	348.14		196.29	203.5
4	5	10	6	1	5		6	2
186.9	1.31	21.10	143.18	200.6	29.40		408.9	61.5
5	9	4	8	3	12		11	4
209.11	496.1	24.24	28.59	69.39	391.10		60.13	200.1
2	6	4	1	10	11		3	3

The following is Mr. Bexell's reply to his friend Captain Ducie:

"My dear Ducie,—With this note you will receive back your confounded MS., but without

a translation. I have spent a good deal of time and labour in trying to decipher it, and the conclusions at which I have arrived may be briefly laid before you.

1. Each group of three sets of figures represents a word.

2. Each group of two sets of figures—those with a line above and a line below—represents a letter only.

3. Those letters put together from the point where the double line begins to the point where it ceases, make up a word.

4. In the composition of this cryptogram *a book* has been used as the basis on which to work.

5. In every group of three sets of figures the first set represents the page of the book; the second, the number of the line on that page, probably counting from the top; the third the position in ordinary rotation of the word on that line. Thus you have the number of the page, the number of the line, and the number of the word.

6. In the case of the interlined groups of two

sets of figures, the first set represents the number of the page; the second set the number of the line, probably counting from the top, of which line the required letter will prove to be the initial one.

7. The words thus spelled out by the interlined groups of double figures are, in all probability, proper names, or other uncommon words not to be found in their entirety in the book on which the cryptogram is based, and consequently requiring to be worked out letter by letter.

8. The book in question is not a dictionary, nor any other work the words of which come in alphabetical rotation. It is probably some ordinary book which the writer of the cryptogram, and the person for whom it is written, have agreed upon beforehand to make use of as a key. I have no means of judging whether the book in question is an English or a foreign one, but by it alone, whatever it may be, can the cryptogram be read.

"Now, my dear Ducie, it would be wearisome for me to describe, and equally wearisome for you to read, the processes of reasoning by means

of which the above deductions have been arrived at. But in order to satisfy you that my assumptions are not entirely fanciful or destitute of sober sense, I will describe to you, as briefly as may be, the process by means of which I have come to the conclusion that the book used as the basis of the cryptogram was not a dictionary or other work in which the words come in alphabetical rotation: and such a conclusion is very easy of proof.

"In a document so lengthy as the MS. of your friend the Scotch laird there must of necessity be many repetitions of what may be called 'indispensable words'—words one or more of which are used in the composition of almost every long sentence. I allude to such words as *a, an, and, as, of, by, the, their, them, these, they, you, I, it,* &c. The first thing to do was to analyse the MS., and classify the different groups of figures for the purpose of ascertaining the number of repetitions of any one group. My analysis showed me that these repetitions were surprisingly few. Forty groups were repeated twice, fifteen three times, and nine groups four times. Now, according to my calculation, the

MS. contains 1283 words. Out of those 1283 words there must have been more than the number of repetitions shown by my analysis, and not of one only, but of several of what I have called 'indispensable words.' Had a dictionary been made use of by the writer of the MS. all such repetitions would have been referred to one particular page, and to one particular line of that page: that is to say, in every case where a word repeated itself in the MS. the same group of numbers would in every case have been its *valeur*. As the repetitions were so few I could only conclude that some book of an ordinary kind had been made use of, and that the writer of the cryptogram had been sufficiently ingenious not to repeat his numbers very frequently in the case of 'indispensable words,' but had in the majority of cases given a fresh group of numbers at each repetition of such a word. I might, perhaps, go further and say that in the majority of cases where a group of figures is repeated such group refers to some word less frequently used than any of those specified above, and that one group was obliged to do duty on

two or more occasions, simply because the writer was unable to find the word more than once in the book on which his cryptogram was based.

"Having once arrived at the conclusion that some book had been used as the basis of the cryptogram, my next supposition that each group of three sets of numbers showed the page of the book, the number of the line from the top, and the position of the required word in that line, seemed at once borne out by an analysis of the figures themselves. Thus, taking the first set of figures in each group, I found that in no case did they run to a higher number than 500: which would seem to indicate that the basis-book was limited to that number of pages. The second set of figures ran to no higher number than 60, which would seem to limit the lines on each page to that number. The third set of figures in no case yielded a higher number than 12; which numerals, according to my theory, would indicate the maximum number of words in each line. Thus you have at once (if such information is of any use to you) a sort of a key to the size of the required volume.

"I think I have now written enough, my dear Ducie, to afford you some idea of the method by means of which my conclusions have been arrived at. If you wish for further details I will supply them—but by word of mouth, an it be all the same to your honour; for this child detests letter-writing, and has taken a vow that if he reach the end of his present pen-and-ink venture in safety, he will never in time to come devote more than two pages of cream note to even the most exacting of friends: the sequitur of which is, that if you want to know more than is here set down you must give the writer a call, when you shall be talked to to your heart's content.

"Your exhausted friend,

"Geo. Bexell.

"Captain Ducie."

Captain Ducie had too great a respect for the knowledge of his friend Bexell in matters like the one under review, to dream for one moment of testing the validity of any of his conclusions. He accepted the whole of them as final. Having

got the conclusions themselves, he cared nothing as to the processes by which they had been deduced: the details interested him not at all. Consequently he kept out of the way of his friend, being in truth considerably disgusted to find that, so far as he was himself concerned, the affair had ended in a *fiasco*. He could not look upon it in any other light. It was utterly out of the range of probability that he should ever succeed in ascertaining on what particular book the cryptogram was based, and no other knowledge was now of the slightest avail. He was half inclined to send back the MS. anonymously to Platzoff, as being of no further use to himself; but he was restrained by the thought that there was just a faint chance that the much-desired volume might turn up during his forthcoming visit to Bon Repos—that even at the eleventh hour the key might be found.

He was terribly chagrined to think that the act of genteel petty larceny, by which he had lowered himself more in his own eyes than he would have cared to acknowledge, had been so absolutely barren of results. That portion of

his moral anatomy which he would have called his conscience pricked him shrewdly now and again, but such pricks had their origin in the fact of his knavery having been unsuccessful. Had his wrong-doing won for him such a prize as he had fondly hoped to gain by its means, Conscience would have let her rusted spear hang unheeded on the wall, and beyond giving utterance now and then to a faint whisper in the dead of night, would have troubled him not at all.

It was some time in the middle of the night, about a week after Bexell had sent him back the papers, that he awoke suddenly and completely, and there before him, as clearly as though it had been written in letters of fire on the black wall, he saw the title of the wished-for book. It was the book mentioned by Platzoff in his prefatory note: *The Confessions of Parthenio the Mystic.* The knowledge had come to him like a revelation. How stupid he must have been never to have thought of it before! That night he slept no more.

Next morning he went to one of the most famous bookdealers in the metropolis. The book

inquired for by Ducie was not known to the man. But that did not say that there was no such work in existence. Through his agents at home and abroad inquiry should be made, and the result communicated to Captain Ducie. Therewith the latter was obliged to content himself. Three days later came a pressing note of invitation from Platzoff.

CHAPTER XI.

BON REPOS.

On a certain fine morning towards the end of May, Captain Ducie took train at Euston-square, and late the same afternoon was set down at Windermere. A fly conveyed himself and his portmanteau to the edge of the lake. Singling out one from the tiny fleet of pleasure boats always to be found at the Bowness landing-stage, Captain Ducie seated himself in the stern, and lighted his cigar. The boatman's sinewy arms soon pulled him out into the middle of the lake, when the head of the little craft was set for Bon Repos.

The sun was dipping to the western hills. In his wake he had left a rack of torn and fiery cloud, as though he had rent his garments in wrath and cast them from him. Soft, grey

mists and purple shadows were beginning to strike upward from the vales, but on the great shoulders of Fairfield, and on the scarred fronts of other giants further away, the sunshine lingered lovingly. It was like the hand of Childhood caressing the rugged brows of Age.

With that glorious panorama which crowns the head of the lake before his eyes, with the rhythmic beat of the oars and the soft pulsing of the water in his ears, with the blue smoke-rings of his cigar rising like visible aspirations through the evening air, an unwonted peace, a soft brooding quietude, began to settle down upon the captain's world-worn spirit; and through the stillness came a faint whisper, like his mother's voice speaking from the far-off years of childhood, recalling to his memory things once known, but too long forgotten; lessons too long despised, but with a vital truth underlying them which he seemed never to have realized till now. Suddenly the boat's keel grazed the shingly strand, and there before him, half shrouded in the shadows of evening, was Bon Repos.

A genuine north-country house, strong, rugged, and homely-looking, despite its Gallic cognomen. It was built of the rough grey stone of the district, and roofed with large blue slates. It stood at the head of a small lawn that sloped gently up from the lake. Immediately behind the house a precipitous hill covered with a thick growth of underwood and young trees swept upward to a considerable height. A narrow, winding lane, the only carriage approach to the house, wound round the base of this hill, and joined the high road a quarter of a mile away. The house was only two stories high, but was large enough to have accommodated a numerous and well-to-do family. The windows were all set in a framework of plain stone, but on the lower floor some of them had been modernized, the small square bluish panes having given place to polished plate glass, of which two panes only were needed for each window. But this was an innovation that had not spread far. The lawn was bordered with a tasteful diversity of shrubs and flowers, while here and there the tender fingers of some climbing plant seemed trying to

smooth away a wrinkle in the rugged front of the old house.

Captain Ducie walked up the gravelled pathway that led from the lake to the house, the boatman with his portmanteau bringing up the rear. Before he could touch either bell or knocker, the door was noiselessly opened, and a coloured servant, in a suit of plain black, greeted him with a respectful bow.

"Captain Ducie, sir, if I am not misinformed?"

"I am Captain Ducie."

"Sir, you are expected. Your room is ready. Dinner will be served in half an hour from now. My master will meet you when you come downstairs."

The portmanteau having been brought in, and the boatman paid and dismissed, said the coloured servant, "I will show you to your rooms if you will allow me to do so. The man appointed to wait upon you will follow with your luggage in a minute or two." He led the way, and Ducie followed in silence.

The tired captain gave a sigh of relief and gratitude, and flung himself into an easy-chair

as the door closed behind his conductor. His two rooms were *en suite,* and while as replete with comfort as the most thorough-going Englishman need desire, had yet about them a touch of lightness and elegance that smacked of a taste that had been educated on the Continent, and was unfettered by insular prejudices.

"At Stapleton I had a loft that was hardly fit for a groom to sleep in; here I have two rooms that a cardinal might feel proud to occupy. Vive la Russe!"

M. Platzoff was waiting at the foot of the staircase when Ducie went down. A cordial greeting passed between the two, and the host at once led the way to the dining-room. Platzoff in his suit of black and white cravat, with his cadaverous face, blue-black hair, and chin-tuft, and the elaborate curl on the top of his forehead, looked, at the first glance, more like a ghastly undertaker's man, or a waiter at a foreign café, than the host of an English country house. But a second glance would have shown you his embroidered linen, and the flashing gems on his

fingers; and you could not be long with him without being made aware that you were in the company of a thorough man of the world—of one who had travelled much and observed much; of one whose correspondents kept him *au courant* with all the chief topics of the day. He knew, and could tell you, the secret history of the last new opera; how much had been paid for it, what it had cost to produce, and all about the great green-room cabal against the new prima donna. He knew what amount of originality could be safely claimed for the last new drama that was taking the town by storm, and how many times the same story had been hashed up before. He had read the last French novel of any note, and could favour you with a few personal reminiscences of its author not generally known. As regarded political knowledge—if all his statements were to be trusted—he was informed as to much that was going on behind the great drop-scene. He knew how the wires were pulled that moved the puppets who danced in public, especially those wires which were pulled at Paris, Vienna, and St. Petersburg. Before Ducie had been six hours at Bon Repos

he knew more about political intrigues at home and abroad than he had ever dreamt of in the whole course of his previous life.

The dining-room at Bon Repos was a long low-ceilinged apartment, panelled with black oak, and fitted up in a rich and sombre style that was yet very different from the dull heavy formality that obtains among three-fourths of the dining-rooms in English country houses. Indeed, throughout the appointments and fittings of Bon Repos there was a touch of something Oriental grafted on to French taste, combined with a thorough knowledge and appreciation of insular comfort. From the dining-room windows a lovely stretch of the lake could be seen glimmering in the starlight, and our two friends sat this evening over their wine by the wide open sash, gazing out into the delicious night. Behind them, in the room, two or three candles were burning in silver sconces; but at the window they were sitting in that sort of half light which seems exactly suited for confidential talk. Captain Ducie took advantage of it after a time to ask his host a question which he would

perhaps have scarcely cared to put by broad daylight.

"Have you heard any news of your lost manuscript?"

"None whatever," answered Platzoff. "Neither do I expect, after this lapse of time, to hear anything further concerning it. It has probably never been found, or if found, has (as you suggested at the 'Golden Griffin') fallen into the hands of some one too ignorant, or too incurious, to master the secret of the cipher."

"It has been much in my thoughts since I saw you last," said Ducie. "Was the MS. in your own writing, may I ask?"

"It was in my own writing," answered the Russian. "It was a confidential communication intended for the eye of my dearest friend, and for his eye only. It was unfinished when I lost it. I had been staying a few days at one of your English spas when I joined you in the train on the day of the accident. The MS., as far as it went, had all been written before I left home, but I took it with me in my despatch-box, together with other private papers, although

I knew that I could not add a single line to it while I should be from home. I have wished a thousand times since that I had left it behind me."

"I have heard of people to whom cryptography is a favourite study," said the captain; "people who pride themselves on their ability to master the most difficult cipher ever invented. Let us hope that your MS. has not fallen into the hands of one of these clever individuals."

Platzoff shrugged his shoulders. "Let us hope so, indeed," he said. "But I will not believe in any such untoward event. Too long a time has elapsed since the loss for me not to have heard something respecting the MS., had it been found by any one who knew how to make use of it. Besides, I would defy the most clever reader of cyptography to master my MS. without——Ah, bah! where's the use of talking about it? Should not you like some tobacco? Daylight's last tint has vanished, and there is a chill air sweeping down from the hills."

As they left the window, Platzoff added: "One of the most annoying features connected

with my loss arises from the fact that all my labour will have to be gone through again—and very tedious work it is. I am now engaged on a second MS., which is, as nearly as I can make it, a copy of the first one; and it is a task which must be done by myself alone. To have even one confidant would be to stultify the whole affair. Another glass of claret, and then I will introduce you to my sanctum."

The coloured man who had opened the door for Captain Ducie had been in and out of the dining-room several times. He was evidently a favourite servant. Platzoff had addressed him as Cleon, and Ducie had now a question or two to ask concerning him.

Cleon was a mulatto, tall, agile, and strong. Not bad-looking by any means, but carrying with him unmistakeable traces of the negro blood in his veins. His hair was that of a genuine African—crisp and black, and was one mass of short curls; but except for a certain fulness of the lips his features were of the ordinary Caucasian type. He wore no beard, but a thin straight line of black moustache. His complexion was

yellow, but a different yellow from that of his master—dusky, passionate, lava-like; suggestive of fiery depths below. His eyes, too, glowed with a smothered fire that seemed as if it might blaze out at any moment, and there was in them an expression of snake-like treachery that made Captain Ducie shudder involuntarily, as though he had seen some loathsome reptile, the first time he looked steadily into their half-veiled depths. One look into each other's eyes was sufficient for both these men.

"Monsieur Cleon and I are born enemies, and he knows it as well as I do," murmured Ducie to himself, after the first secret signal of defiance had passed between the two. "Well, I never was afraid of any man in my life, and I'm not going to begin by being afraid of a valet." With that he shrugged his shoulders, and turned his back contemptuously on the mulatto.

Cleon in his suit of black and white tie, with his quiet stealthy movements and unobtrusive attentions, would have been pronounced bon style as a gentleman's gentleman in the grandest

of Belgravian mansions. Had he suddenly come into a fortune, and gone into society where his antecedents were unknown, five-sixths of his male associates would have pronounced him "a deuced gentlemanly fellow." The remaining one-sixth might have held a somewhat different opinion.

"That coloured fellow seems to be a great favourite with you," remarked Ducie, as Cleon left the room.

"And well he may be," answered Platzoff. "On two separate occasions I owed my life to him. Once in South America, when a couple of brigands had got me at their mercy, and were about to try the temper of their knives on my throat. He potted them both one after the other. On the second occasion he rescued me from a tiger in the jungle, who was desirous of dining *à la Russe*. I have not made a favourite of Cleon without having my reasons for so doing."

"He seems to me a shrewd fellow, and one who understands his business."

"Cleon is not destitute of ability. When I

settled at Bon Repos I made him major-domo of my small establishment, but he still retains his old position as my body-servant. I offered long ago to release him; but he will not allow any third person to come between himself and me, and I should not feel comfortable under the attentions of any one else."

Platzoff opened the door as he ceased speaking and led the way to the smoking-room.

As you lifted the curtain and went in, it was like passing at one step from Europe to the East —from the banks of Windermere to the shores of the Bosphorus. It was a circular apartment with a low cushioned divan running completely round it, except where broken by the two doorways, curtained with hangings of dark brown. The floor was an arabesque of different coloured tiles covered here and there with a tiny square of bright-hued Persian carpet. The walls were panelled with stamped leather to the height of six feet from the ground; above the panelling they were painted of a delicate cream colour with here and there a maxim or apothegm from the Koran, in the Arabic character, picked out

in different colours. From the ceiling a silver lamp swung on chains of silver. In the centre of the room was a marble table on which were pipes and hookahs, cigars and tobaccos of various kinds. Smaller tables were placed here and there close to the divan for the convenience of smokers.

Platzoff having asked Ducie to excuse him for five minutes, passed through the second doorway, and left the captain to an undisturbed survey of the room. He came back in a few minutes, but so transformed in outward appearance that Ducie scarcely knew him. He had left the room in the full evening costume of an English gentleman: he came back in the turban and flowing robes of a follower of the Prophet. But however comfortable his Eastern habit might be, M. Platzoff lacked the quiet dignity and grave repose of your genuine Turkish gentleman.

"I am going to smoke one of these hookahs; let me recommend you to try another," said Platzoff as he squatted himself cross-legged on the divan.

He touched a tiny gong, and Cleon entered.

"Select a hookah for Monsieur Ducie, and prepare it."

So Cleon, having chosen a pipe, tipped it with a new amber mouthpiece, charged the bowl with fragrant Turkish tobacco, handed the stem to Ducie, and then applied the light. The same service was next performed for his master. Then he withdrew, but only to reappear a minute or two later with coffee served up in the Oriental fashion—black and strong, without sugar or cream.

"This is one of my little smoke-nights," said Platzoff as soon as they were alone. "Last night was one of my big smoke-nights."

"You speak a language I do not understand."

"I call those occasions on which I smoke opium my big smoke-nights."

"Can it be true that you are an opium smoker?" said Ducie.

"It can be and is quite true that I am addicted to that so-called pernicious habit. To me

it is one of the few good things this world has to offer. Opium is the key that unlocks the golden gates of Dreamland. To its disciples alone is revealed the true secret of subjective happiness. But we will talk more of this at some future time."

CHAPTER XII.

THE AMSTERDAM EDITION OF 1698.

Captain Ducie soon fell into the quiet routine of life at Bon Repos. It was not distasteful to him. To a younger man it might have seemed to lack variety, to have impinged too closely on the verge of dulness; but Captain Ducie had reached that time of life when quiet pleasures please the most, and when much can be forgiven the man who sets before you a dinner worth eating. Not that Ducie had anything to forgive. Platzoff had contracted a great liking for his guest, and his hospitality was of that cordial quality which makes the object of it feel himself thoroughly at home. Besides this, the captain knew when he was well off, and had no wish to exchange his present pleasant quarters, his rambles across the hills, and his sailings on the

lake, for his dingy bedroom in town with the harassing hunted-down life of a man upon whom a dozen writs are waiting to be served, and who can never feel certain that his next day's dinner may not be eaten behind the locks and bars of a prison.

Sometimes on horseback, sometimes on foot, sometimes accompanied by his host, sometimes alone, Ducie explored the lovely country round Bon Repos to his heart's content. Another source of pleasure and healthful exercise he found in long solitary pulls up and down the lake in a tiny skiff which had been set apart for his service. In the evening came dinner and conversation with his host, with perhaps a game or two of billiards to finish up the day.

Captain Ducie found no scope for the exercise of his gambling proclivities at Bon Repos. Platzoff never touched card or dice. He could handle a cue tolerably well, but beyond a half-crown game, Ducie giving him ten points out of fifty, he could never be persuaded to venture. If the captain, when he went down to Bon Repos, had any expectation of replenishing his pockets by

means of faro and unlimited loo, he was wretchedly mistaken. But whatever secret annoyance he might feel, he was too much a man of the world to allow his host even to suspect its existence.

Of society in the ordinary meaning of that word there was absolutely none at Bon Repos. None of the neighbouring families by any chance ever called on Platzoff. By no chance did Platzoff ever call on any of the neighbouring families. "They are too good for me, too orthodox, too strait-laced," exclaimed the Russian one day in his quiet jeering way. "Or it may be that I am not good enough for them. Any way, we do not coalesce. Rather are we like flint and steel, and eliminate a spark whenever we come in contact. They look upon me as a pagan, and hold me in horror. I look upon three-fourths of them as Pharisees, and hold them in contempt. Good people there are among them no doubt; people whom it would be a pleasure to know, but I have neither time, health, nor inclination for conventional English visiting—for your ponderous style of hospitality. I am quite

sure that my ideas of men and manners would not coincide with those of the quiet country ladies and gentlemen of these parts; while theirs would seem to me terribly wearisome and jejune. Therefore, as I take it, we are better apart."

By and by Ducie discovered that his host was not so entirely isolated from the world as at first sight he appeared to be. Occasional society there was of a certain kind, intermittent, coming and going like birds of passage. One, or sometimes two visitors, of whose arrival Ducie had heard no previous mention, would now and again put in an appearance at the dinner table, would pass one, or at the most two, nights at Bon Repos, and would then be seen no more, having gone as mysteriously as they had come. These visitors were always foreigners, now of one nationality, now of another; and were always closeted privately with Platzoff for several hours. In appearance some of them were strangely shabby and unkempt, in a wild un-English sort of fashion, while others among them seemed like men to whom the good things of this world were no strangers. But whatever their appearance, they

were all treated by Platzoff as honoured guests for whom nothing at his command was too good. As a matter of course, they were all introduced to Captain Ducie, but none of their names had been heard by him before—indeed, he had a dim suspicion, gathered, he could not have told how, that the names by which they were made known to him were in some cases fictitious ones, and appropriated for that occasion only. But to the captain that fact mattered nothing. They were people whom he should never meet after leaving Bon Repos, or if he did chance to meet them, whom he should never recognise.

One other noticeable feature there was about these birds of passage. They were all men of considerable intelligence—men who could talk tersely and well on almost any topic that might chance to come uppermost at table, or during the after-dinner smoke. Literature, art, science, travel—on any or all of these subjects they had opinions to offer; but one subject there was that seemed tabooed among them as by common consent: that subject was politics. Captain Ducie saw and recognised the fact, but

as he himself was a man who cared nothing for politics of any kind, and would have voted them a bore in general conversation, he was by no means disposed to resent their extrusion from the table talk at Bon Repos.

As to whom and what these strangers might be, no direct information was vouchsafed by the Russian. Captain Ducie was left in a great measure to draw his own conclusions. A certain conversation which he had one day with his host seemed to throw some light on the matter. Ducie had been asking Platzoff whether he did not sometimes regret having secluded himself so entirely from the world; whether he did not long sometimes to be in the great centres of humanity, in London or Paris, where alone life's full flavour can be tasted.

"Whenever Bon Repos becomes Mal Repos," answered Platzoff,—"whenever a longing such as you speak of comes over me,—and it does come sometimes,—then I flee away for a few weeks, to London oftener than anywhere else—certainly not to Paris: that to me is forbidden ground. By-and-by I come back to my nest among the

hills vowing there is no place like it in the world's wide round. But even when I am here, I am not so shut out from the world and its great interests as you seem to imagine. I see History enacting itself before my eyes, and I cannot sit by with averted face. I hear the grand chant of Liberty as the beautiful goddess comes nearer and nearer and smites down one Oppressor after another with her red right hand; and I cannot shut my ears. I have been an actor in the great drama of Revolution ever since, a lad of twelve, I saw my father borne off in chains to Siberia, and heard my mother with her dying breath curse the tyrant who had sent him there. Since that day, Conspiracy has been the very salt of my life. For it I have fought and bled; for it I have suffered hunger, thirst, imprisonment, and dangers unnumbered. Paris, Vienna, St. Petersburg, are all places that I can never hope to see again. For me to set foot in any one of the three would be to run the risk of almost certain detection, and in my case detection would mean hopeless incarceration for the poor remainder of my days. To the world at

large I may seem nothing but a simple country gentleman, living a dull life in a spot remote from all stirring interests. But I may tell you, sir (in strictest confidence, mind) that although I stand a little aside from the noise and heat of the battle, I work for it with heart and brain as busily, and to better purpose let us hope, than when I was a much younger man. I am still a conspirator, and a conspirator I shall remain till Death taps me on the shoulder and serves me with his last great writ of *habeas corpus*."

These words recurred to Ducie's memory a day or two later when he found at the dinner-table two foreigners whom he had never seen before. "Is it possible that these bearded gentlemen are also conspirators?" asked the captain of himself. "If so, their mode of life must be a very uncomfortable one. It never seems to include the use of a razor, and very sparingly that of comb and brush. I am glad that I have nothing to do with what Platzoff calls *The Great Cause*."

But Captain Ducie was not a man to trouble himself with the affairs of other people unless his own interests were in some way affected

thereby. M. Paul Platzoff might have been mixed up with all the plots in Europe for anything the captain cared: it was a mere question of taste, and he never interfered with another man's tastes when they did not clash with his own. Besides, in the present case, his attention was claimed by what to him was a matter of far more serious interest. From day to day he was anxiously waiting for news from the London bookseller who was making inquiries on his behalf as to the possibility of obtaining a copy of "The Confessions of Parthenio the Mystic." Day passed after day till a fortnight had gone, and still there came no line from the bookseller.

Ducie's impatience could no longer be restrained: he wrote, asking for news. The third day brought a reply. The bookseller had at last heard of a copy. It was in the library of a monastery in the Low Countries. The coffers of the monastery needed replenishing; the abbot was willing to part with the book, but the price of it would be a sum equivalent to fifty guineas of English money. Such was the purport of the letter.

To Captain Ducie, just then, fifty guineas were a matter of serious moment. For a full hour he debated with himself whether or no he should order the book to be bought. Supposing it duly purchased; supposing that it really proved to be the key by which the secret of the Russian's MS. could be mastered; might not the secret itself prove utterly worthless as far as he, Ducie, was concerned? Might it not be merely a secret bearing on one of those confounded political plots in which Platzoff was implicated—a matter of moment no doubt to the writer, but of no earthly utility to any one not inoculated with such March-hare madness? These were the questions that it behoved him to consider. At the end of an hour he decided that the game was worth the candle: he would risk his fifty guineas.

Taking one of Platzoff's horses, he rode without delay to the nearest telegraph station. His message to the bookseller was as under:

"Buy the book, and send it down to me here by confidential messenger."

The next few days were days of suspense, of burning impatience. The messenger arrived

almost sooner than Ducie expected, bringing the book with him. Ducie sighed as he signed the cheque for fifty guineas, with ten pounds for expenses. That shabby calf-bound worm-eaten volume seemed such a poor exchange for the precious slip of paper that had just left his fingers. But what was done could not be undone, so he locked the book away carefully in his desk and locked up his impatience with it till nightfall.

He could not get away from Platzoff till close upon midnight. When he got to his own room he bolted the door, and drew the curtains across the windows, although he knew that it was impossible for any one to spy on him from without. Then he opened his desk, spread out the MS. before him, and took up the volume. A calf-bound volume with red edges, and numbering five hundred pages. It was in English, and the title-page stated it to be "The Confessions of Parthenio the Mystic: a Romance. Translated from the Latin. With Annotations, and a Key to Sundrie Dark Meanings. Imprinted at Amsterdam in the Year of Grace 1698." It was in excellent condition.

Captain Ducie's eagerness to test his prize would not allow of more than a very cursory inspection of the general contents of the volume. So far as he could make out it seemed to be a political satire veiled under the transparent garb of an Eastern story. Parthenio was represented as a holy man—a Spiritualist or Mystic—who had lived for many years in a cave in one of the Arabian deserts. Commanded at length by what he calls the "inner voice," he sets out on his travels to visit sundry courts and kingdoms of the East. He returns after five years, and writes, for the benefit of his disciples, an account of the chief things he has seen and learned while on his travels. The courts of England, France, and Spain, under fictitious names, are the chief marks for his ponderous satire, and some of the greatest men in the three kingdoms are lashed with his most scurrilous abuse. Under any circumstances the book was not one that Captain Ducie would have cared to wade through, and in the present case, after dipping into a page here and there, and finding that it contained nothing likely to interest him, he proceeded at once to the more serious business of the evening.

The clocks of Bon Repos were striking midnight as Captain Ducie proceeded to test the value of the first group of figures on the MS., according to the formula laid down for him by his friend Bexell. The first group of figures was $\frac{253.12}{4}$. Turning to page two hundred and fifty-three of the Confessions, and counting from the top of that page, he found that the fourth word of the twelfth line gave him *you*. The second clump of figures was $\frac{59.25}{1}$. The first word of the twenty-fifth line of page fifty-nine gave him *will*. The third clump of figures gave him *have*, and the fourth *gathered*. These four words ranged in order read: *You will have gathered*. Such a sequence of words could not arise from mere accident. When he had got thus far Ducie knew that Platzoff's secret would soon be a secret no longer, that in a very little while the heart of the mystery would be laid bare.

Encouraged by his success, Ducie went to work with renewed vigour, and before the clock struck one he had completed the first sentence of the MS., which ran as under:—

You will have gathered from the foregoing note, my dear Carlo, that I have something

of importance to relate to you—something that I am desirous of keeping a secret from every one but yourself.

As his friend Bexell surmised, Ducie found that the groups of figures distinguished from the rest by two horizontal lines, one above and one below, as thus 58.7 14.29 368.1 209.18 43.11, were the *valeurs* of some proper name or other word for which there was no equivalent in the book. Such words had to be spelt out letter by letter in the same way that complete words were picked out in other cases. Thus the marked figures as above, when taken letter by letter, made up the word *Carlo*—a name to which there was nothing similar in the Confessions.

It had been broad daylight for two hours before Captain Ducie grew tired of his task and went to bed. He went on with it next night, and every night till it was finished. It was a task that deepened in interest as he proceeded with it. It grew upon him to such a degree that when near the close he feigned illness and kept his room for a whole day, so that he might the sooner get it done.

If Captain Ducie had ever amused himself with trying to imagine the nature of the secret which he had now succeeded in unravelling, the reality must have been very different from his expectations. One gigantic thought, whose coming made him breathless for a moment, took possession of him, as a demon might have done, almost before he had finished his task, dwarfing all other thoughts by its magnitude. It was a thought that found relief in six words only: "It must and shall be mine!"

CHAPTER XIII.

M. PLATZOFF'S SECRET—CAPAIN DUCIE'S TRANSLATION OF M. PAUL PLATZOFF'S MS.

"You will have gathered from the foregoing note, my dear Carlo, that I have something of importance to relate to you; something that I am desirous of keeping a secret from every one but yourself. From the same source you will have learned where to find the key by which alone the lock of my secret can be opened.

"I was induced by two reasons to make use of 'The Confessions of Parthenio the Mystic' as the basis of my cryptographic communication. In the first place, each of us has in his possession a copy of the same edition of that rare book, viz. the Amsterdam edition of 1698. In the second place, there are not more than half a dozen copies of the same work in England; so

that if this document were by mischance to fall into the hands of some person other than him for whom it is intended, such person, even if sufficiently acute to guess at the means by which alone the cryptogram can be read, would still find it a matter of some difficulty to obtain possession of the requisite key.

"I address these lines to you, my dear Lampini, not because you and I have been friends from youth, not because we have shared many dangers and hardship together, not because we have both kept the same great object in view throughout life; in fine, I do not address them to you as a private individual, but in your official capacity as Secretary of the Secret Society of San Marco.

"You know how deeply I have had the objects of the Society at heart ever since, twenty-five years ago, I was deemed worthy of being made one of the initiated. You know how earnestly I have striven to forward its views both in England and abroad; that through my connexion with it I am *suspect* at nearly every capital on the Continent—that I could not enter

some of them except at the risk of my life; that health, time, money—all have been ungrudgingly given for the furtherance of the same great end.

"Heaven knows, I am not penning these lines in any self-gratulatory frame of mind—I who write from this happy haven among the hills. Self-gratulation would ill become such as me. Where I have given gold, others have given their blood. Where I have given time and labour, others have undergone long and cruel imprisonments, have been separated from all they loved on earth, and have seen the best years of their life fade hopelessly out between the four walls of a living tomb. What are my petty sacrifices to such as these?

"But not to every one is granted the happiness of cementing a great cause with his heart's blood. We must each work in the appointed way—some of us in the full light of day; others in obscure corners, at work that can never be seen, putting in the stones of the foundation painfully one by one, but never destined to share in the glory of building the roof of the edifice.

"Sometimes, in your letters to me, especially when those letters contained any disheartening news, I have detected a tone of despondency, a latent doubt as to whether the cause, to which both of us are so firmly bound, was really progressing; whether it was not fighting against hope to continue the battle any longer; whether it would not be wiser to retreat to the few caves and fastnesses that were left us, and leaving Liberty still languishing in chains, and Tyranny still rampant in the high places of the world, to wage no longer a useless war against the irresistible Fates. Happily, with you such moods were of the rarest: you would have been more than mortal had not your soul at times sat in sackcloth and ashes.

"Such seasons of doubt and gloom have come to me also; but I know that in our secret hearts we both of us have felt that there was a self-sustaining power, a latent vitality in our cause that nothing could crush out utterly; that the more it was trampled on the more dangerous it would become, and the faster it would spread. Certain great events that have happened during

the last twelve months have done more towards the propagation of the ideas we have so much at heart than in our wildest dreams we dare have hoped only three short years ago. Gravely considering these things, it seems to me that the time cannot be far distant when the contingent plan of operations as agreed upon by the Central Committee two years ago, to which I gave in my adhesion on the occasion of your last visit to Bon Repos, will have to replace the scheme at present in operation, and will become the great lever in carrying out the Society's policy in time to come.

"When the time shall be ripe, but one difficulty will stand in the way of carrying out the proposed contingent plan. That difficulty will arise from the fact that the Society's present expenses will then be trebled or quadrupled, and that a vast accession to the funds at command of the Committee for the time being will thus be imperatively necessitated. As a step, as a something towards obviating whatever difficulty may arise from lack of funds, I have devised to you, as Secretary of the Society, the whole of my personal

estate, amounting in the aggregate to close upon fifteen thousand pounds. This property will not accrue to you till my decease; but that event will happen no very long time hence. My will, duly signed and witnessed, will be found in the hands of my lawyer.

"But it was not merely to advise you of this bequest that I have sought such a roundabout mode of communication. I have a greater and a much more important bequest to make to the Society, through you, its accredited agent. I have in my possession a green DIAMOND, the estimated value of which is a hundred and fifty thousand pounds. This precious gem I shall leave to you, by you to be sold after my death, the proceeds of the sale to be added to the other funded property of the Society of San Marco.

"The Diamond in question became mine during my travels in India many years ago. I believe my estimate of its value to be a correct one. Except my confidential servant, Cleon (whom you will remember), no one is aware that I have in my possession a stone of such immense value. I have never trusted it out of my own keep-

ing, but have always retained it by me, in a safe place, where I could lay my hands upon it at a moment's notice. But not even to Cleon have I entrusted the secret of the hiding-place, incorruptibly faithful as I believe him to be. It is a secret locked in my own bosom alone.

"You will now understand why I have resorted to cryptography in bringing these facts under your notice. It is intended that these lines shall not be read by you till after my decease. Had I adopted the ordinary mode of communicating with you, it seemed to me not impossible that some other eye than the one for which it was intended might peruse this statement before it reached you, and that through some foul play or underhand deed the Diamond might never come into your possession.

"It only remains for me now to point out where and by what means the Diamond may be found. It is hidden away in——"

Here the MS., never completed, ended abruptly.

CHAPTER XIV.

DRASHKIL-SMOKING.

"IT must and shall be mine!"

So spoke Captain Ducie on the spur of the moment as he wrote the last word of his translation of M. Platzoff's MS. And yet there was a keen sense of disappointment working within him. His blood had been at fever heat during the latter part of his task. Each fresh sentence of the cryptogram as he began to decipher it would, he hoped, before he reached the end of it reveal to him the hiding-place of the great Diamond. Up to the very last sentence he had thus fondly deluded himself, only to find that the abrupt ending of the MS. left him still on the brink of the secret, and left him there without any clue by which he could advance a single step beyond that point. He was terribly disappointed, and

the longer he brooded over the case the more entirely hopeless was the aspect it put on.

But there was an elasticity of mind about Captain Ducie that would not allow him to despair utterly for any length of time. In the course of a few days, as he began to recover from his first chagrin, he at the same time began to turn the affair of the Diamond over and over in his mind, now in one way, now in another, looking at it in this light and in that; trying to find the first faint indications of a clue which, judiciously followed up, might conduct him step by step to the heart of the mystery. Two questions naturally offered themselves for solution. First: Did Platzoff habitually carry the Diamond about his person? Second: Was it kept in some skilfully-devised hiding-place about the house? These were questions that could be answered only by time and observation.

So Captain Ducie went about Bon Repos like a man with half a dozen pairs of eyes, seeing, and not only seeing but noting, a hundred little things such as would never have been observed by him under ordinary circumstances. But when, at the

end of a week, he came to sum up and classify his observations, and to consider what bearing they had upon the great mystery of the hiding-place of the Diamond, he found that they had no bearing upon it whatever; that for anything seen or heard by him the world might hold no such precious gem, and the Russian's letter to Signor Lampini might be nothing more than an elaborate hoax.

When the access of chagrin caused by the recognition of this fact had in some degree subsided, Ducie was ready enough to ridicule his own foolish expectations. "Platzoff has had the Diamond in his possession for years. For him there is nothing of novelty in such a fact. Yet here have I been foolish enough to expect that in the course of one short week I should discover by some sign or token the spot where it is hidden, and that too after I knew from his own confession that the secret was one which he guarded most jealously. I might be here for five years and be not one whit wiser at the end of that time as regards the hiding-place of the Diamond than I am now. From this day I give up the affair as a bad job."

Nevertheless, he did not quite do that. He kept up his habit of seeing and noting little things, but without any definite views as to any ulterior benefit that might accrue to him therefrom. Perhaps there was some vague idea floating in his mind that Fortune, who had served him so many kind turns in years gone by, might befriend him once again in this matter—might point out to him the wished-for clue, and indicate by what means he could secure the Diamond for his own.

The magnitude of the temptation dazzled him. Captain Ducie would not have picked your pocket, or have stolen your watch, or your horse, or the title-deeds of your property. He had never put another man's name to a bill instead of his own. You might have made him trustee for your widow or children, and have felt sure that their interests would have been scrupulously respected at his hands. Yet with all this—strange contradiction as it may seem—if he could have laid surreptitious fingers on M. Platzoff's Diamond, that gentleman would certainly never have seen his cherished gem again. But had Platzoff placed it in his

hands and said, "Take this to London for me and deposit it at my bankers," the commission would have been faithfully fulfilled. It seemed as if the element of mystery, of deliberate concealment, made all the difference in Captain Ducie's unspoken estimate of the case. Besides, would there not be something princely in such a theft? You cannot put a man who steals a diamond worth a hundred and fifty thousand pounds in the category of common thieves. Such an act verges on the sublime.

One of the things seen and noticed by Captain Ducie was the absence, through illness, of the mulatto, Cleon, from his duties, and the substitution in his place of a man whom Ducie had never seen before. This stranger was both clever and obliging, and Platzoff himself confessed that the fellow made such a good substitute that he missed Cleon less than he at first feared he should have done. He was indeed very assiduous, and found time to do many odd jobs for Captain Ducie, who contracted quite a liking for him.

Between Ducie and Cleon there existed one of those blind unreasoning hatreds which spring up

full-armed and murderous at first sight. Such enmities are not the less deadly because they sometimes find no relief in words. Cleon treated Ducie with as much outward respect and courtesy as he did any other of his master's guests; no private communication ever passed between the two, and yet each understood the other's feelings towards him, and both of them were wise enough to keep as far apart as possible. Neither of them dreamed at that time of the strange fruit which their mutual enmity was to bear in time to come. Meanwhile, Cleon lay sick in his own room, and Captain Ducie was rather gladdened thereby.

M. Platzoff rarely touched cigar or pipe till after dinner; but, whatever company he might have, when that meal was over, it was his invariable custom to retire for an hour or two to the room consecrated to the uses of the Great Herb, and his guests seldom or never declined to accompany him. To Captain Ducie, as an inveterate smoker, these *séances* were very pleasant.

On the very first evening of the captain's ar-

rival at Bon Repos, M. Platzoff had intimated that he was an opium smoker, and that at no very distant date he would enlighten Ducie as to the practice in question. About a week later, as they sat down to their pipes and coffee, said Platzoff, "This is one of my big smoke-nights. To-night I go on a journey of discovery into Dreamland—a country that no explorations can exhaust, where beggars are the equals of kings, and where the Fates that control our actions are touched with a fine eccentricity that in a more commonplace world would be termed madness. But there nothing is commonplace."

"You are going to smoke opium?" said Ducie, interrogatively.

"I am going to smoke drashkil. Let me, for this once, persuade you to follow my example."

"For this once I would rather be excused," said Ducie, laughingly.

Platzoff shrugged his shoulders. "I offer to open for you the golden gates of a land full of more strange and wondrous things than were ever dreamed of by any early voyager as being in that new world on whose discovery he was bent; I

offer to open up for you a set of experiences so utterly fresh and startling that your matter-of-fact English intellect cannot even conceive of such things. I offer you all this, and you laugh me down with an air of superiority, as though I were about to present you with something which, however precious it might be in my eyes, in yours was utterly without value."

"If I sin at all," said Ducie, "it is through ignorance. The subject is one respecting which I know next to nothing. But I must confess that about experiences such as you speak of there is an intangibility—a want of substance—that to me would make them seem singularly valueless."

"And is not the thing we call life one tissue of intangibilities?" asked the Russian. "You can touch neither the beginning nor the end of it. Do not its most cherished pleasures fly you even as you are in the very act of trying to grasp them? Do you know for certain that you—you yourself—are really here?—that you do not merely dream that you are here? What do you know?"

"Your theories are too far-fetched for me,"

said Ducie. "A dream can be nothing more than itself—nothing can give it backbone or substance. To me such things are of no more value than the shadow I cast behind me when I walk in the sun."

"And yet without substance there could be no shadow," snarled the Russian.

"Do your experiences in any way resemble those recorded by De Quincey?"

"They do and they do not," answered Platzoff. "I can often trace, or fancy that I can, a slight connecting likeness, arising probably from the fact that in the case of both of us a similar, or nearly similar agent was employed for a similar purpose. But, as a rule, the intellectual difference between any two men is sufficient to render their experiences in this respect utterly dissimilar."

"It does not follow, I presume, that all the visions induced by the imbibition of opium, or what you term drashkil, are pleasant ones?"

"By no means. You cannot have forgotten what De Quincey has to say on that score. But whether they are pleasant or the contrary, I accept them as so much experience, and in so far

I am satisfied. You look incredulous, but I tell you, sir, that what I see, and what I undergo—subjectively—while under the influence of drashkil, make up for me an experience as real, that dwells as vividly in my memory and that can be brought to mind like any other set of recollections, as if it were built up brick by brick, fact by fact, out of the incidents of everyday life. And all such experiences are valuable in this wise: that whatever I see while under the influence of drashkil, I see, as it were, with the eyes of genius. I breathe a keener atmosphere; I have finer intuitions; the brain is no longer clogged with that part of me which is mortal; in whatever imaginary scenes I assist, whether as actor or spectator matters not, I seem to discern the underlying meaning of things—I hear the low faint beating of the hidden pulses of the world. To come back from this enchanted realm to the dull realities of everyday life is like depriving some hero of fairyland of his magic gifts and reducing him to the level of common humanity."

"At which pleasant level I pray ever to be

kept," said Ducie; "I have no desire to soar into those regions of romance where you seem so thoroughly at home."

"So be it," said Platzoff, drily. "The intellects of you English have been nourished on beef and beer for so many generations, that there is no such thing as spiritual insight left among you. We must not expect too much." This was said not ill-naturedly, but in that quiet jeering tone which was almost habitual with Platzoff.

Ducie maintained a judicious silence and went on puffing gravely at his meerschaum. Platzoff touched the gong and Cleon entered, for this conversation took place before the illness of the latter. The Russian held up two fingers, and Cleon bowed. Then Cleon opened a mahogany box in one corner of the room, and took out of it a pipe-bowl of red clay, into which he fitted a flexible tube five or six yards in length and tipped with amber. The bowl was then fixed into a stand of black oak about a foot high, and there held securely, and the mouth-piece handed to Platzoff. Cleon next opened an inlaid box, and by means of

a tiny silver spatula he cut out a small block of some black greasy-looking mixture, which he proceeded to fit into the bowl of the pipe. On the top of this he sprinkled a little aromatic Turkish tobacco, and then applied an allumette. When he saw that the pipe was fairly alight, he bowed and withdrew.

While these preparations were going on Platzoff had not been silent. "I have spoken to you of what I am about to smoke, both as opium and as drashkil," he said. "It is not by any means pure opium. With that great drug are mixed two or three others that modify and influence the chief ingredient materially. I had the secret of the preparation from a Hindoo gentleman while I was in India. It was imparted to me as an immense favour, it being a secret even there. The enthusiastic terms in which he spoke of it have been fully justified by the result, as you would discover for yourself if you could only be persuaded to try it. You shake your head. Eh bien! mon ami; the loss is yours not mine."

"Some of what you have termed your 'ex-

periences' are no doubt very singular ones?" said Ducie, interrogatively.

"They are, very singular," answered Platzoff. "In my last drashkil-dream, for instance, I believed myself to be an Indian fakir, and I seemed to realize to the full the strange life of one of those strange beings. I was stationed in the shade of a large tree just without the gate of some great city where all who came and went could see me. On the ground, a little way in front of me, was a wooden bowl for the reception of the offerings of the charitable. I had kept both my hands close shut for so many years that the nails had grown into the flesh, and the muscles had hardened so that I could no longer open them; and I was looked upon as a very holy man. The words of the passers-by were sweet in my ears, but I never spoke to them in return. Silent and immovable, I stood there through the livelong day,—and in my vision it was always day. I had the power of looking back, and I knew that, in the first instance, I had been led by religious enthusiasm to adopt that mode of life. I should be in the

world but not of it, I should have more time for that introspective contemplation the aim and end of which is mental absorption in the divine Brahma; besides which, people would praise me, and all the world would know that I was a holy man. But the strangest part of the affair remains to be told. In the eyes of the people I had grown in sanctity from year to year; but in my own heart I knew that instead of approaching nearer to Brahma, I was becoming more depraved, more wicked, with a great inward wickedness, as time went on. I struggled desperately against the slough of sin that was slowly creeping over me, but in vain. It seemed to me as if the choice were given me either to renounce my life of outward-seeming sanctity, and becoming as other men were, to feel again that inward peace which had been mine long years before; or else, while remaining holy in the eyes of the multitude, to feel myself sinking into a bottomless pit of wickedness from which I could never more hope to emerge. My mental tortures while this struggle was going on, I can never forget: they are as much a real experience to me as if they

had made up a part of my genuine waking life. And still I stood with closed hands in the shade of the tree; and the people cried out that I was holy, and placed their offerings in my bowl; and I could not make up my mind to abnegate the title they gave me and become as they were. And still I grew in inward wickedness, till I loathed myself as if I were some vile reptile; and so the struggle went on, and was still going on, when I opened my eyes and found myself again at Bon Repos."

As Platzoff ceased speaking, Cleon applied the light, and Ducie in his eagerness drew a little nearer. Platzoff was dressed *à la* Turk, and sat with crossed legs on the low divan that ran round the room. Slowly and deliberately he inhaled the smoke from his pipe, expelling it a moment later, in part through his nostrils and in part through his lips. The layer of tobacco at the top of the bowl was quickly burnt to ashes. By this time the drug below was fairly alight, and before long a thick white sickly smoke began to ascend in rings and graceful spirals towards the roof of the room. Cleon was gone, and a

solemn silence was maintained by both the men. Platzoff's eyes, black and piercing, were fixed on vacancy; they seemed to be gazing on some picture visible to himself alone. Ducie was careful not to disturb him. His inhalations were slow, gentle, and regular. After a time, a thin film or glaze began to gather over his wide-open eyes, dimming their brightness, and making them seem like the eyes of some one dead. His complexion became livid, his face more cadaverous than it naturally was. Then his eyes closed slowly and gently, like those of an infant dropping to sleep. For a little time longer he kept on inhaling the smoke, but every minute the inhalations became fainter and fewer in number. At length the hand that held the pipe dropped nervelessly by his side, the amber mouthpiece slipped from between his lips, his jaw dropped, and, with an almost imperceptible sigh, his head sank softly back on to the cushions behind, and M. Paul Platzoff was in the opium-eater's paradise.

Ducie, who had never seen any one similarly affected, was frightened by his host's death-like appearance. He was doubtful whether Platzoff

had not been seized with a fit. In order to satisfy himself he touched the gong and summoned Cleon. That incomparable domestic glided in, noiseless as a shadow.

"Does your master always look as he does now after he has been smoking opium?" asked the captain.

"Always, sir."

"And how long does it take him to come round?"

"That depends, sir, on the strength of the dose he has been smoking. The preparation is made of different strengths to suit him at different times; but always when he has been smoking drashkil I leave him undisturbed till midnight. If by that time he has not come round naturally and of his own accord, I carry him to bed and then administer to him a certain draught, which has the effect of sending him into a natural and healthy sleep, from which he awakes next morning thoroughly refreshed."

"Then you will come to-night at twelve, and see how your master is by that time?" said Ducie.

"It is part of my duty to do so," answered Cleon.

"Then I will wait here till that time," said the captain. Cleon bowed and disappeared.

So Ducie kept watch and ward for four hours, during the whole of which time Platzoff lay, except for his breathing, like one dead. As the last stroke of midnight struck, Cleon reappeared. His master showed not the slightest symptom of returning consciousness. Having examined him narrowly for a moment or two, he turned to Ducie.

"You must pardon me, sir, for leaving you alone," he said, "but I must now take my master off to bed. He will scarcely wake up for conversation to-night."

"Proceed as though I were not here," said Ducie. "I will just finish this weed, and then I too will turn in."

Platzoff's private rooms, forming a suite four in number, were on the ground floor of Bon Repos. From the main corridor the first that you entered was the smoking-room already described. Next to that was the dressing-room, from which you passed into the bedroom. The

last of the four was a small square room, fitted up with book-shelves, and used as a private library and study.

Cleon, who was a strong, muscular fellow, lifted Platzoff's shrivelled body as easily as he might have done that of a child, and so carried him out of the room.

Ducie met his host at the breakfast-table next morning. The latter seemed as well as usual, and was much amused when Ducie told him of his alarm, and how he had summoned Cleon under the impression that Platzoff had been taken dangerously ill.

Platzoff rarely indulged in the luxury of drashkil-smoking oftener than once a week. His constitution was delicate, and a too frequent use of so dangerous a drug would have tended to shatter still further his already enfeebled health. Besides, as he said, he wished to keep it as a luxury, and not, by a too frequent indulgence in it, to take off the fine edge of enjoyment and render it common-place. Ducie had several subsequent opportunities of witnessing the process of drashkil-smoking and its effects, but one

description will serve for all. On every occasion the same formula was gone through, precisely as first seen by Ducie. The pipe was charged and lighted by Cleon (after he became ill, by the new servant Jasmin). Precisely at midnight Cleon returned, and either conducted or carried his master to bed, as the necessities of the case might require. It was his knowledge of the latter fact that stood Ducie in such good stead later on, when he came to elaborate the details of his scheme for stealing the Great Mogul Diamond.

But as yet his scheme was in embryo. His visit was drawing to a close, and he was still without the slightest clue to the hiding-place of the Diamond.

CHAPTER XV.

THE DIAMOND.

Captain Ducie had been six weeks at Bon Repos; his visit would come to a close in the course of three or four days, but he was still as ignorant of the hiding-place of the Diamond as on that evening when he learned for the first time that M. Platzoff had such a treasure in his possession.

Since the completion of his translation of the stolen MS. he had dreamed day and night of the Diamond. It was said to be worth a hundred and fifty thousand pounds. If he could only succeed in appropriating it, what a different life would be his in time to come! In such a case, he would of course be obliged to leave England for ever. But he was quite prepared to do that. He was without any tie of kindred or friendship

that need bind him to his native land. Once safe in another hemisphere, he would dispose of the Diamond, and the proceeds would enable him to live as a gentleman ought to live for the remainder of his days. Truly, a pleasant dream.

But it was only a dream after all, as he himself in his cooler moments was quite ready to acknowledge. It was nothing but a dream even when Platzoff wrung from him an unreluctant consent to extend his visit at Bon Repos for another six weeks. If he stayed for six months, there seemed no likelihood that at the end of that time he would be one whit wiser on the one point on which he thirsted for information than he was now. Still, he was glad for various reasons to retain his pleasant quarters a little while longer.

Truth to tell, in Captain Ducie M. Platzoff had found a guest so much to his liking that he could not make up his mind to let him go again. Ducie was incurious, or appeared to be so; he saw and heard, and asked no questions. He seemed to be absolutely destitute of political

principles, and therein he formed a pleasant contrast both to M. Platzoff himself and to the swarm of foreign gentlemen who at different times found their way to Bon Repos. He was at once a good listener and a good talker. In fine, he made himself in every way so agreeable, and was at the same time so thorough a gentleman, that Platzoff was as glad to retain him as he himself was pleased to stay.

Three out of the Captain's second term of six weeks had nearly come to an end when, on a certain evening, as he and Platzoff sat together in the smoke-room, the latter broached a subject which Ducie would have wagered all he possessed —though that was little enough—that his host would have been the last man in the world even to hint at.

"I think I have heard you say that you have a taste for diamonds and precious stones," remarked Platzoff. Ducie had hazarded such a remark on one or two occasions as a quiet attempt to draw Platzoff out, but had only succeeded in eliciting a little shrug, and a cold smile, as though for him such a statement could have no possible interest.

"If I have said so to you I have only spoken the truth," replied Ducie. "I am passionately fond of gems and precious stones of every kind. Have you any to show me?"

"I have in my possession a green diamond said to be worth a hundred and fifty thousand pounds," answered the Russian, quietly.

The simulated surprise with which Captain Ducie received this announcement was a piece of genuine comedy. His real surprise arose from the fact of Platzoff having chosen to mention the matter to him at all.

"Great heaven!" he exclaimed. "Can you be in earnest? Had I heard such a statement from the lips of any other man than you, I should have questioned either his sanity or his truth."

"You need not question either one or the other in my case," answered Platzoff, with a smile. "My assertion is true to the letter. Some evening when I am less lazy than I am now, you shall see the stone and examine it for yourself."

"I take it as a great proof of your friendship

for me, monsieur," said Ducie warmly, "that you have chosen to make me the recipient of such a confidence."

"It *is* a proof of my friendship," said the Russian. "No one of my political friends—and I have many that are dear to me, both in England and abroad—is aware that I have in my possession so inestimable a gem. But you, sir, are an English gentleman, and my friend for reasons unconnected with politics; I know that my secret will be safe in your keeping."

Ducie winced inwardly, but he answered with grave cordiality, "The event, my dear Platzoff, will prove that your confidence has not been misplaced."

After this the Russian went on to tell Ducie that the MS. lost at the time of the railway accident had reference to the great Diamond; that it contained secret instructions, addressed to a very dear friend of the writer, as to the disposal of the Diamond after his, Platzoff's, death; all of which was quite as well known to Ducie as to the Russian himself; but the captain sat with his pipe between his lips, and listened

with an appearance of quiet interest that impressed his host greatly.

That night Ducie's mind was too excited to allow of sleep. He was about to be shown the great Diamond; but would the mere fact of seeing it advance him one step towards obtaining possession of it? Would Platzoff, when showing him the stone, show him also the place where it was ordinarily kept. His confidence in Ducie would scarcely carry him as far as that. In any case, it would be something to have seen the Diamond, and for the rest, Ducie must trust to the chapter of accidents and his own wits. On one point he was fully determined, to make the Diamond his own at any cost, if the slightest possible chance of doing so were afforded him. He was dazzled by the magnitude of the temptation; so much so, indeed, that he never seemed to realize in his own mind the foulness of the deed by which alone it could become his property. Had any man hinted that he was a thief either in act or intention, he would have repudiated the term with scorn—would have repudiated it even in his own mind, for he made a point of

hoodwinking and cozening himself as though he were some other person, whose good opinion must on no account be forfeited.

Captain Ducie awaited with hidden impatience the hour when it should please M. Platzoff to fulfil his promise. He had not long to wait. Three evenings later, as they sat in the smoke-room, said Platzoff, "To-night you shall see the Great Mogul Diamond. No eyes save my own have seen it for ten years. I must ask you to put yourself for an hour or two under my instructions. Are you minded so to do?"

"I shall be most happy to carry out your wishes in every way," answered Ducie. "Consider me as your slave for the time being."

"Attend then, if you please. This evening you will retire to your own rooms at eleven o'clock. Precisely at one-thirty a.m., you will come back here. You will be good enough to come in your slippers, because it is not desirable that any of the household should be disturbed by our proceedings. I have no further orders at present."

"Your lordship's wishes are my commands," answered Ducie with a mock salaam.

They sat talking and smoking till eleven; then Ducie left his host as if for the night. He lay down for a couple of hours on the sofa in his dressing-room. Precisely at one thirty he was on his way back to the smoke-room, his feet encased in a pair of Indian mocassins. A minute later he was joined by Platzoff in dressing-gown and slippers.

"I need hardly tell you, my dear Ducie," began the latter, "that with a piece of property in my possession no larger than a pigeon's egg, and worth so many thousands of pounds, a secure place in which to deposit that property (since I choose to have it always near me) is an object of paramount importance. That secure place of deposit I have at Bon Repos. This you may accept as one reason for my having lived in such an out-of-the-world spot for so many years. It is a place known to myself alone. After my death it will become known to one person only—to the person into whose possession the Diamond will pass when I shall be no longer among the

living, The secret will be told him that he may have the means of finding the Diamond, but not even to him will it become known till after my decease. Under these circumstances, my dear Ducie, you will, I am sure, excuse me for keeping the hiding-place of the Diamond a secret still—a secret even from you. Say—will you not?"

With a malediction at his heart, but with a smile on his lips, Captain Ducie made reply. "Pray offer no excuses, my dear Platzoff, where none are needed. What I want is to see the Diamond itself, not to know where it is kept. Such a piece of information would be of no earthly use to me, and it would involve a responsibility which, under any circumstances, I should hardly care to assume."

"It is well; you are an English gentleman," said the Russian, with a ceremonious inclination of the head, "and your words are based on wisdom and truth. It is necessary that I should blindfold you: oblige me with your handkerchief."

Ducie with a smile handed over his handkerchief, and Platzoff proceeded to blindfold him—

an operation which was rapidly and effectually performed by the deft fingers of the Russian.

"Now, give me your hand, and come with me, but do not speak till you are spoken to."

So Ducie laid a finger in the Russian's thin cold palm, and the latter taking a small bronze hand-lamp, conducted his bandaged companion from the room.

In two minutes after leaving the smoke-room Ducie's geographical ideas of the place were completely at fault. Platzoff led him through so many corridors and passages, turning now to the right hand, and now to the left,—he guided him up and down so many flights of stairs, now of stone and now of wood, that he lost his reckoning entirely, and felt as though he were being conducted through some place far more spacious than Bon Repos. He counted the number of stairs in each flight that he went up or down. In two or three cases the numbers tallied, which induced him to think that Platzoff was conducting him twice over the same ground, in order perhaps the more effectually to confuse his ideas as to the position of the place to which he was being led.

After several minutes spent thus in silent perambulation of the old house, they halted for a moment while Platzoff unlocked a door, after which they passed forward into a room, in the middle of which Ducie was left standing while Platzoff relocked the door, and then busied himself for a minute in trimming the lamp he had brought with him, which had been his only guide through the dark and silent house, for the servants had all gone to bed more than an hour ago.

Ducie thus left to himself for a little while had time for reflection. The floor on which he was standing was covered with a thick soft carpet, consequently he was in one of the best rooms in the house. The atmosphere of this room was penetrated with a very faint aroma of *pot-pourri,* so faint that unless Captain Ducie's nose had been more than ordinarily keen he would never have perceived it. To the best of his knowledge there was only one room in Bon Repos that was permeated with the peculiar scent of *pot-pourri.* That room was M. Platzoff's private study, to which access was obtained through

his bedroom. Ducie had been only twice into this room, but he remembered two facts in connexion with it. First, the scent already spoken of: secondly, that besides the door which opened into it from the bedroom, there was another door which he had noticed as being shut and locked both times that he was there. If the room in which they now were was really M. Platzoff's study, they had probably obtained access to it through the second door.

While silently revolving these thoughts in his mind, Captain Ducie's fingers were busy with the formation of two tiny paper pellets, each no bigger than a pea. Unseen by Platzoff he contrived to drop these pellets on the carpet.

"I must really apologize," said the Russian, next moment, "for keeping you waiting so long; but this lamp will not burn properly."

"Don't hurry yourself on my account," said Ducie. "I am quite jolly. My eyes are ready bandaged: I am only waiting for the axe and the block."

"We are not going to dispose of you in quite so summary a fashion," said the Russian. "One

minute more and your eyesight shall be restored to you."

Ducie's quick ears caught a low click, as though some one had touched a spring. Then there was a faint rumbling, as though something were being rolled back on hidden wheels.

"Lend me your hand again, and bend that tall figure of yours. Step carefully. There is another staircase to descend—the last and the steepest of all."

Keeping fast hold of Platzoff's hand, Ducie followed slowly and cautiously, counting the steps as he went down. They were of stone, and were twenty-two in number. At the bottom of the staircase another door was unlocked. The two passed through, and the door was shut and re-locked behind them.

"Be blind no longer!" said Platzoff, taking off the handkerchief and handing it to Ducie with a smile. A few seconds elapsed before the latter could discern anything clearly. Then he saw that he was in a small vaulted chamber about seven feet in height, with a flagged floor, but without furniture of any kind save a small

table of black oak on which Platzoff's lamp was now burning. The atmosphere of this dungeon had struck him with a sudden chill as he went in. At each end was a door, both of iron. The one that had opened to admit them was set in the thick masonry of the wall; the one at the opposite end seemed built into the solid rock.

"Before we go any farther," said Platzoff, "I may as well explain to you how it happens that a respectable old country-house like Bon Repos has such a suspicious-looking hiding-place about its premises. You must know that I bought the house, many years ago, of the last representative of an old north-country family. He was a bachelor, and in him the family died out. Three years after I had come to reside here the old man, at that time on his death-bed, sent me a letter and a key. The letter revealed to me the secret of the place we are now exploring, of which I had no previous knowledge; the key is that of the two iron doors. It seems that the old man's ancestors had been deeply implicated in the Jacobite risings of last century. The

house had been searched several times, and on one occasion occupied by Hanoverian troops. As a provision against such contingencies this hiding-place (a natural one as far as the cavern beyond is concerned, which has probably existed for thousands of years) was then first connected with the interior of the house, and rendered practicable at a moment's notice; and here on several occasions, certain members of the family, together with their plate and titledeeds, lay concealed for weeks at a time. The old gentleman gave me a solemn assurance that the secret existed with him alone; all who had been in any way implicated in the earlier troubles having died long ago. As the property had now become mine by purchase, he though it only right that before he died these facts should be brought to my knowledge. You may imagine, my dear Ducie, with what eagerness I seized upon this place as a safe depository for my Diamond, which, up to that time, I had been obliged to carry about my person. And now, forward to the heart of the mystery!"

Having unlocked and flung open the second

iron door, Platzoff took up his lamp, and, closely followed by Ducie, entered a narrow winding passage in the rock. After following this passage, which tended slightly downwards for a considerable distance, they emerged into a large cavernous opening in the heart of the hill.

Platzoff's first act was, by means of a long crook, to draw down within reach of his hand a large iron lamp that was suspended from the roof by a running chain. This lamp he lighted from the hand-lamp he had brought with him. As soon as released, it ascended to its former position, about ten feet from the ground. It burned with a clear white flame that lighted up every nook and cranny of the place. The sides of the cave were of irregular formation. Measuring by the eye, Ducie estimated the cave to be about sixty yards in length, by a breadth, in the widest part, of twenty. In height it appeared to be about forty feet. The floor was covered with a carpet of thick brown sand, but whether this covering was a natural or an artificial one Ducie had no means of judging.

The atmosphere of the place was cold and damp, and the walls in many places dripped with moisture; in other places they scintillated in the lamplight as though thousands of minute gems were embedded in their surface.

In the middle of the floor, on a pedestal of stones loosely piled together, was a hideous idol, about four feet in height, made of wood, and painted in various colours. In the centre of its forehead gleamed the great Diamond.

"Behold!" was all that Platzoff said, as he pointed to the idol. Then they both stood and gazed in silence.

Many contending emotions were at work just then in Ducie's breast, chief of which was a burning, almost unconquerable desire to make that glorious gem his own at every risk. In his ear a fiend seemed to be whispering.

"All you have to do," it seemed to say, "is to grip old Platzoff tightly round the neck for a couple of minutes. His thread of life is frail, and would be easily broken. Then possess yourself of the Diamond and his keys. Go back by the way you came and fasten everything behind

you. The household is all abed, and you could get away unseen. Long before the body of Platzoff would be discovered, if indeed it were ever discovered, you would be far away and beyond all fear of pursuit. Think ! That tiny stone is worth a hundred and fifty thousand pounds."

This was Ducie's temptation. It shook him inwardly as a reed is shaken by the wind. Outwardly he was his ordinary quiet impassive self, only gazing with eyes that gleamed on the gleaming gem, which shone like a new-fallen star on the forehead of that hideous image.

The spell was broken by Platzoff, who, going up to the idol, and passing his hand through an orifice at the back of the skull, took the Diamond out of its resting-place, close behind the hole in the forehead, through which it was seen from the front. With thumb and forefinger he took it daintily out, and going back to Ducie dropped it into the outstretched palm of the latter.

Ducie turned the Diamond over and over, and

held it up before the light between his forefinger and thumb, and tried the weight of it on his palm. It was in the simple form of a table diamond, with only sixteen facets in all, and was just as it had left the fingers of some Indian cutter a couple of centuries ago. It glowed with a green fire, deep, yet tender, that flashed through its facets and smote the duller lamplight with sparkles of intense brilliancy. This, then, was the wondrous gem that many a time and oft had felt the touch of great Aurengzebe's hand! Ducie seemed to be examining it most closely; but, in truth, at that very moment he was debating in his own mind the terrible question of murder or no murder, and scarcely saw the stone itself at all.

"Ami, you do not seem to admire my Diamond!" said the Russian presently, with a touch of pathos in his voice.

Ducie pressed the Diamond back into Platzoff's hands. "I admire it so much," said he, "that I cannot enter into any commonplace terms of admiration. I will talk to you to-morrow respecting it. At present I lack fitting words."

The Russian took back the stone, pressed it to his lips, and then went and replaced it in the forehead of the idol.

"Who is your friend there?" said Ducie, with a desperate attempt to wrench his thoughts away from that all-absorbing temptation.

"I am not sufficiently learned in Hindu mythology to tell you his name with certainty," answered Platzoff. "I take him to be no less a personage than Vishnu. He is seated upon the folds of the snake Jesha, whose seven heads bend over him to afford him shade. In one hand he holds a spray of the sacred lotus. He is certainly hideous enough to be a very great personage. Do you know, my dear Ducie," went on Platzoff, "I have a very curious theory with regard to that Hindu gentleman, whoever he may be. Many years ago he was worshipped in some great Eastern temple, and had priests and acolytes without number to attend to his wants; and then, as now, the great Diamond shone in his forehead. By some mischance the Diamond was lost or stolen—in any case, he was dispossessed of it. From that moment he was

an unhappy idol. He derived pleasure no longer from being worshipped, he could rest neither by night nor day—he had lost his greatest treasure. When he could no longer endure this state of wretchedness he stole out of the temple one fine night unknown to any one, and set out on his travels in search of the missing Diamond. Was it simple accident or occult knowledge, that directed his wanderings after a time to the shop of a London curiosity dealer, where I saw him, fell in love with him, and bought him? I know not: I only know that he and his darling Diamond were at last re-united, and here they have remained ever since. You smile as if I had been relating a pleasant fable. But tell me if you can how it happens that in the forehead of yonder idol there is a small cavity lined with gold into which the Diamond fits with the most exact nicety. That cavity was there when I bought the idol and has in no way been altered since. The shape of the Diamond, as you have seen for yourself, is rather peculiar. Is it therefore possible that mere accident can be at the bottom of such a coincidence? Is not my theory

of the Wandering Idol much more probable as well as far more poetical? You smile again. You English are the greatest sceptics in the world. But it is time to go. We have seen all there is to be seen, and the temperature of this place will not benefit my rheumatism."

So the lamp was put out, and Idol and Diamond were left to darkness and solitude. In the vaulted room, at the entrance to the winding way that led to the cavern, Ducie's eyes were again bandaged. Then up the twenty-two stone stairs, and so into the carpeted room above, where was the scent of *pot-pourri*. From this room they came by many passages and flights of stairs back to the smoking-room, where Ducie's bandage was removed. One last pipe, a little desultory conversation, and then bed.

M. Platzoff being out of the way for an hour or two next afternoon, Captain Ducie contrived to pay a surreptitious visit to his host's private study. On the carpet he found one of the two paper pellets which he had dropped from his fingers the previous evening. There, too, was the same faint, sickly smell that had filled his nos-

trils when the handkerchief was over his eyes, which he now traced to a huge china jar in one corner, filled with the dried leaves of flowers gathered long summers before.

CHAPTER XVI.

JANET'S RETURN.

"THERE he is! there is dear Major Strickland!"

The tidal train was just steaming into London Bridge station on a certain spring evening as the above words were spoken. From a window of one of the carriages a bright young face was peering eagerly, a face which lighted up with a smile of rare sweetness the moment Major Strickland's soldierly figure came into view. A tiny gloved hand was held out as a signal, the major's eye was caught, the train came to a stand, and next moment Janet Holme was on the platform with her arms round the old soldier's neck, and her lips held up for a kiss.

The publicity of this transaction seemed slightly to shock the sensibilities of Miss Close, the English teacher, in whose charge Janet had

come over; but she was won to a quite different view of the affair when the major, after requesting to be introduced to her, shook her cordially by the hand, said how greatly obliged he was to her for the care she had taken of "his dear Miss Holme," and invited her to dine next day with himself and Janet. Then Miss Close went her way, and the Major and Janet went theirs in a cab, to a hotel not a hundred miles from Piccadilly.

Janet's first words as they got clear of the station were:

"And now you must tell me how everybody is at Dupley Walls."

"Everybody was quite well when I left home, except one person—Sister Agnes."

"Dear Sister Agnes!" said Janet, and the tears sprang to her eyes in a moment. "I am more sorry than I can tell to hear that she is ill."

"Not ill exactly, but ailing," said the major. "You must not alarm yourself unnecessarily. She caught a severe cold one wet evening about three months ago, as she was on her way home

from visiting some poor sick woman in the village, and she seems never to have been quite well since."

"I had a letter from her five days ago, but she never hinted to me that she was not well."

"I can quite believe that. She is not one given to complain about herself, but one who strives to soothe the complaints of others. The good she does in her quiet way among the poor is something wonderful. I must tell you what an old bedridden man, to whom she had been very kind, said to her the other day. Said he, 'If everybody had their rights in this world, ma'am, or if I was king of fairyland, you should have a pair of angel's wings, so that everybody might know how good you are.' And there are a hundred others who would say the same thing."

"If I had not had her dear letters to hearten me and cheer me up, I think that many a time I should have broken down utterly under the dreadful monotony of my life at the Pension Clissot. I had no holidays, in the common meaning of the word; no dear friends to go and see; none even to come once in a way to see me,

were it only for one happy hour. I had no home recollections to which I could look back fondly in memory, and the future was all a blank—a mystery. But the letters of Sister Agnes spoke to me like the voice of a dear friend. They purified me, they lifted me out of my common work-a-day troubles, and all the petty meannesses of school-girl existence, and set before me the example of a good and noble life as the one thing worth striving for in this weary world."

"Tut, tut, my dear child!" said the major, "you are far too young to call the world a weary world. Please heaven, it shall not be quite such a dreary place for you in time to come. We will begin the change this very evening. We shall just be in time to get a bit of dinner, and then, heigh! for the play."

"The play, dear Major Strickland!" said Janet, with a sudden flush and an eager light in her eyes; "but would Sister Agnes approve of my going to such a place?"

"I scarcely think, poverina, that Sister Agnes would disapprove of any place to which I might choose to take you."

"Forgive me!" cried Janet, "I did not intend you to construe my words in that way."

"I have never construed anything since I was at school fifty years ago," answered the major, laughingly. "Can you tell me now from your heart, little one, that you would not like to go to the play?"

"I should like very, very much to go, and after what has been said I will never forgive you if you do not take me."

"The penalty would be too severe. It is agreed that we shall go."

"To me it seems only seven days instead of seven years since I was last driven through London streets," resumed Janet, as they were crawling up Fleet Street. "The same shops, the same houses, and even, as it seems to me, the same people crowding the pathways; and, to complete the illusion, the same kind travelling companion now as then."

"To me the illusion seems by no means so complete. To London Bridge, seven years ago, I took a simple child of twelve: to-day I bring back a young lady of nineteen—a woman, in point of fact—who, I have no doubt, understands

more of flirtation than she does of French, and would rather graduate in coquetry than in crochet-work."

"Take care then, sir, lest I wing my unslaked arrows at you."

"You are too late in the day, dear child, to practise on me. I am your devoted slave already—bound fast to the wheel of your triumphant car. What more would you have?"

The hotel was reached at last, and the major gave Janet a short quarter of an hour for her toilette. When she got downstairs dinner was on the point of being served, and she found covers laid for three. Before she had time to ask a question, the third person entered the room. He was a tall well-built man of six or seven-and-twenty. He had light-brown hair, closely-cropped but still inclined to curl, and a thick beard and moustache of the same colour. He had blue eyes, and a pleasant smile, and the easy self-possessed manner of one who had seen "the world of men and things." His left sleeve was empty.

Janet did not immediately recognise him, he looked so much older, so different in every way;

but at the first sound of his voice she knew who stood before her. He came forward and held out his hand — the one hand that was left him.

"May I venture to call myself an old friend, Miss Holme? and to hope that even after all these years I am not quite forgotten?"

"I recognise you by your voice, not by your face. You are Mr. George Strickland. You it was who saved my life. Whatever else I may have forgotten, I have not forgotten that."

"I am too well pleased to find that I live in your memory at all to cavil with your reason for recollecting me."

"But—but, I never heard—no one ever told me—" Then she stopped with tears in her eyes, and glanced at his empty sleeve.

"That I had left part of myself in India," he said, finishing the sentence for her. "Such, nevertheless, is the case. Uncle there says that the yellow rascals were so fond of me that they could not bear to part from me altogether. For my own part, I think myself fortunate that they did not keep me there *in toto*, in which case I should

not have had the pleasure of meeting you here to-day."

He had been holding her hand quite an unnecessary length of time. She now withdrew it gently. Their eyes met for one brief instant, then Janet turned away and seated herself at the table. The flush caused by the surprise of the meeting still lingered on her face, the tear-drops still lingered in her eyes, and as George Strickland sat down opposite to her he thought that he had never seen a sweeter vision nor one that appealed more directly to his imagination and his heart.

Janet Holme at nineteen was very pleasant to look upon. Her face was not one of mere commonplace prettiness, but had an individuality of its own that caused it to linger in the memory like some sweet picture that once seen cannot readily be forgotten. Her eyes were of a tender luminous grey, full of candour and goodness. Her hair was a deep glossy brown; her face was oval, and her nose a delicate aquiline. On ordinary occasions she had little or no colour, yet no one could have taken the clear pallor of

her cheek as a token of ill health; it seemed rather a result of the depth and earnestness of the life within her.

In her wardrobe there was a lack of things fashionable, and as she sat at dinner this evening she had on a dress of black alpaca, made after a very quiet and nun-like style; with a thin streak of snow-white collar and cuff round throat and wrist; but without any ornament save a necklace of bog-oak, cut after an antique pattern, and a tiny gold locket in which was a photographic likeness of Sister Agnes.

That was a very pleasant little dinner party. In the course of conversation it came out that, a few days previously, Captain George had been decorated with the Victoria Cross. Janet's heart thrilled within her as the major told in simple unexaggerated terms of the special deed of heroism by which the great distinction had been won. The major told also how George was now invalided on half-pay; and her heart thrilled with a still sweeter emotion when he went on to say that the young soldier would henceforth reside with him at Tydsbury—at

Tydsbury which is only a short two miles from Dupley Walls! The feeling with which she heard this simple piece of news was one to which she had hitherto been an utter stranger. She asked herself, and blushed as she asked, whence this new sweet feeling emanated. But she was satisfied with asking the question, and seemed to think that no answer was required.

When dinner was over they set out for the play. Janet had never been inside a theatre before, and for her the experience was an utterly novel and delightful one.

On the third day after Janet's arrival in London they all went down to Tydsbury together—the major, and she, and George. But in the course of those three days the major took Janet about a good deal, and introduced her to nearly all the orthodox sights of the Great City—and a strange kaleidoscopic jumble they seemed at the time, only to be afterwards rearranged by Memory as portions of a bright and sunny picture the like of which she scarcely dared hope ever to see again.

Captain Strickland parted from the major and

Janet at Tydsbury station. The two latter were bound for Dupley Walls, for the major felt that his task would have been ill performed had he failed to deliver Janet into Lady Pollexfen's own hands. As they rumbled along the quiet country roads, which brought vividly back to Janet's mind the evening when she saw Dupley Walls for the first time, said the major: "Do you remember, poppetina, how, seven years ago, I spoke to you of a certain remarkable likeness which you then bore to some one whom I knew when I was quite a young man? or has the circumstance escaped your memory?"

"I remember quite well your speaking of the likeness, and I have often wondered since who the original was of whom I was such a striking copy. I remember, too, how positively Lady Pollexfen denied the resemblance which you so strongly insisted upon."

"Will her ladyship dare to deny it to-day?" said the major, sternly. "I tell you, child, that now you are grown up, the likeness seen by me seven years ago is still more clearly visible. When I look into your eyes I seem to see my own

youth reflected there. When you are near me I can fancy that my lost treasure has not been really lost to me—that she has merely been asleep, like the Princess in the story-book, and that while time has moved on for me, she has come back out of her enchanted slumber as fresh and beautiful as when I saw her last. Ah, poverina! you cannot imagine what a host of recollections the sight of your sweet face conjures up whenever I choose to let my day-dreams have way for a little while."

"I remember your telling me that my parents were unknown to you," answered Janet. "Perhaps the lady to whom I bear so strong a resemblance was my mother."

"No, not your mother, Janet. The lady to whom I refer died unmarried. She and I had been engaged to each other for three years; but Death came and claimed her a fortnight before the day fixed for our wedding; and here I am, a lonely old bachelor still."

"Not quite lonely, dear Major Strickland," murmured Janet, as she lifted his hand and pressed it to her lips.

"True, girl, not quite lonely. I have George, whom I love as though he were a son of my own. And there is Aunt Felicity, as the children used to call her, who is certainly very fond of me, as I also am of her."

"Not forgetting poor me," said Janet.

"Not forgetting you, dear, whom I love like a daughter."

"And who loves you very sincerely in return."

A few minutes later they drew up at Dupley Walls.

CHAPTER XVII.

DUPLEY WALLS AFTER SEVEN YEARS.

Major Strickland rang the bell, and the door was opened by a servant who was strange to Janet.

"Be good enough to inform Lady Pollexfen that Major Strickland and Miss Holme have just arrived from town, and inquire whether her ladyship has any commands."

The servant returned presently. "Her ladyship will see Major Strickland. Miss Holme is to go to the housekeeper's room."

"I will see you again, poverina, after my interview with her ladyship," said the major, as he went off in charge of the footman.

Janet, left alone, threaded her way by the old familiar passages to the housekeeper's room. Dance was not there, being probably in atten-

dance on Lady Pollexfen, and Janet had the room to herself. Her heart was heavy within her. There was a chill sense of friendlessness, of being alone in the world, upon her. Were these cold walls to be the only home her youth would ever know? A few slow salt tears welled from her eyes as she sat brooding over the little wood fire, till presently there came a sound of footsteps, and the major's hand was laid caressingly on her shoulder.

"What, all alone!" he said; "and with nothing better to do than read fairy tales in the glowing embers! Is there no one in all this big house to attend to your wants? But Dance will be here presently, I have no doubt, and the good old soul will do her best to make you comfortable. I have been to pay my respects to her ladyship, who is in one of her unamiable moods this evening. I, however, contrived to wring from her a reluctant consent to your paying Aunt Felicity and me a visit now and then at Tydsbury, and it shall be my business to see that the promise is duly carried out."

"Then I am to remain at Dupley Walls!"

said Janet. "I thought it probable that my visit might be for a few weeks only, as my first one was."

"From what Lady Pollexfen said, I imagine that the present arrangement is to be a permanent one; but she gave no hint of the mode in which she intended to make use of your services, and that she will make use of you in some way, no one who knows her can doubt. And now, dear, I must say good-bye for the present; good-bye, and God bless you! You may look to see me again within the week. Keep up your spirits, and ——but here comes Dance, who will cheer you up far better than I can."

As the major went out, Dance came in. The good soul seemed quite unchanged, except that she had grown older and mellower, and seemed to have sweetened with age like an apple plucked unripe. A little cry of delight burst from her lips the moment she saw Janet. But in the very act of rushing forward with outstretched arms, she stopped. She stopped, and stared, and then curtsied as though involuntarily. "If the dead are ever allowed to come back to this earth,

there is one of them before me now!" she murmured.

Janet caught the words, but her heart was too full to notice them just then. She had her arms round Dance's neck in a moment, and her bright young head was pressed against the old servant's faithful breast.

"Oh! Dance, Dance, I am so glad you are come!"

"Hush! dear heart; hush! my poor child; you must not take on in that way. It seems a poor coming home for you—for I suppose Dupley Walls is to be your home in time to come—but there are those under this roof that love you dearly. Eh! but you are grown tall and bonny, and look as fresh and sweet as a morning in May. Her ladyship ought to be proud of you. But she gets that cantankerous and cross-grained in her old age, that you never know what will suit her for two minutes at a time. For all that, her spirit is just wonderful, and she is a real lady every inch of her. And you, Miss Janet, you are a thorough lady; anybody can see that, and her ladyship will see it as soon as anybody. She

will like you none the worse for being a gentlewoman. But here am I preaching away like any old gadabout, and you not as much as taken your bonnet off yet. Get your things off, dearie, and I'll have a cup of tea ready in no time, and you'll feel ever so much better when you have had it."

Dance could scarcely take her eyes off Janet's face, so attracted was she by the likeness which had wrung from her an exclamation on entering the room.

But Janet was tired, and reserved all questions till the morrow; all questions, except one. That one was,

"How is Sister Agnes?"

Dance shook her head solemnly. "No worse and no better than she has been for the last two months. There is something lingering about her that I don't like. She is far from well, and yet not exactly what we call ill. Morning, noon, and night, she seems so terribly weary, and that is just what frightens me. She has asked after you I don't know how many times, and when tea is over you must go and see her.

Only I must warn you, dear Miss Janet, not to let your feelings overcome you when you see her—not to make a scene. In that case your coming would do her not good but harm."

Janet recovered her spirits in a great measure before tea was over. She and Dance had much to talk about, many pleasant reminiscences to call up and discuss. As if by mutual consent, Lady Pollexfen's name was not mentioned between them.

As soon as tea was over, Dance went to inquire when Sister Agnes would see Miss Holme. The answer was "I will see her at once."

So Janet went with hushed footsteps up the well-remembered staircase, opened the door softly, and stood for a moment on the threshold. Sister Agnes was lying on a sofa. She put her hand suddenly to her side and rose to her feet as Janet entered the room. A tall wasted figure robed in black, with a thin spiritualized face, the natural pallor of which was just now displaced by a transient flush that faded out almost as quickly as it had come. The white head-dress had been cast aside for once, and the black hair streaked

with silver, was tied in a simple knot behind. The large dark eyes looked larger and darker than they had ever looked before, and seemed lit up with an inner fire that had its source in another world than ours.

Sister Agnes advanced a step or two and held out her arms. "My darling!" was all she said as she pressed Janet to her heart, and kissed her again and again. They understood each other without words. The feeling within them was too deep to find expression in any commonplace greeting.

The excitement of the meeting was too much for the strength of Sister Agnes. She was obliged to lie down again. Janet sat by her side caressing one of her wasted hands.

"Your coming has made me very, very happy," murmured Sister Agnes after a time.

"Through all the seven dreary years of my school life," said Janet, "the expectation of some day seeing you again was the one golden dream that the future held before me. That dream has now come true. How I have looked forward to this day none save those who have been circum-

stanced as I have can more than faintly imagine."

"Are you at all acquainted with Lady Pollexfen's intentions in asking you to come to Dupley Walls?"

"Not in the least. A fortnight ago I had no idea that I should so soon be here. I knew that I could not stay much longer at the Pension Clissot, and naturally wondered what instructions Madame Duclos would receive from Lady Pollexfen as to my disposal. The last time I saw her ladyship, her words seemed to imply that after my education should be finished I should have to trust to my own exertions for earning a livelihood; in fact, I have looked upon myself all along as ultimately destined to add one more unit to the great tribe of governesses."

"Such a fate shall not be yours if my weak arm has power to avert it," said Sister Agnes. "For the present your services are required at Dupley Walls, in the capacity of 'companion' to Lady Pollexfen—in brief, to occupy the position held by me for so many years, but from which

I am now obliged to secede on account of ill health."

Janet was almost too astounded to speak.

"Companion to Lady Pollexfen! Me! Impossible!" was all that she could say.

"Why impossible, dear Janet?" asked Sister Agnes, with her low, sweet voice. "I see no element of impossibility in such an arrangement. The duties of the position have been filled by me for many years, they have now devolved upon you, and I am not aware of anything that need preclude your acceptance of them."

"We are not all angels like you, Sister Agnes," said Janet. "Lady Pollexfen, as I remember, is a very peculiar woman. She has no regard for the feelings of others, especially when those others are her inferiors in position. She says the most cruel things she can think of, and cares nothing how deeply they may wound. I am afraid that she and I would never agree."

"That Lady Pollexfen is a very peculiar woman I am quite ready to admit. That she will say things to you that may seem hard and cruel, and that may wound your feelings, I will also

allow. But granting all this, I can deduce from it no reason why the position should be refused by you. Had you gone out as governess, you would probably have had fifty things to contend against quite as disagreeable as Lady Pollexfen's temper and cynical remarks. You are young, dear Janet, and life's battle has yet to be fought by you. You must not expect that everything in this world will arrange itself in accordance with your wishes. You will have many difficulties to fight against and overcome, and the sooner you make up your mind to the acceptance of that fact, the better it will be for you in every way. If I have found the position of companion to Lady Pollexfen not quite unendurable, why should it be found so by you? Besides, her ladyship has many claims upon you—upon your best services in every way. Every farthing that has been spent upon you from the day you were born to the present time has come out of her purse. Except mere life itself, you owe everything to her. And even if this were not so, there are other and peculiar ties between you and her of which you know nothing (although

you may possibly be made acquainted with them by-and-by), which are in themselves sufficient to lead her to expect every reasonable obedience at your hands. You must clothe yourself with good temper, dear Janet, as with armour of proof. You must make up your mind beforehand that however harsh her ladyship's remarks may sometimes seem, you will not answer her again. Do this, and her words will soon be powerless to sting you. Instead of feeling hurt or angry, you will be inclined to pity her—to pray for her. And she deserves pity, Janet, if any woman in this sinful world ever did. To have severed of her own accord those natural ties which other people cherish so fondly; to see herself fading into a dreary old age, and yet of her own free will to shut out the love that should attend her by the way and strew flowers on her path; to have no longer a single earthly hope or pleasure beyond those connected with each day's narrow needs or with the heaping together of more money where there was enough before—in all this there is surely room enough for pity, but none for any harsher feeling."

"Dear Sister Agnes, your words make me thoroughly ashamed of myself," said Janet, with tearful earnestness. "Arrogance ill becomes one like me who have been dependent on the charity of others from the day of my birth. Whatever task may be set me either by Lady Pollexfen or by you, I will do it to the best of my ability. Will you for this once pardon my petulance and ill temper, and I will strive not to offend you again?"

"I am not offended, darling; far from it. I felt sure that you had good sense and good feeling enough to see the matter in its right light when it was properly put before you. But have you no curiosity as to the nature of your new duties?"

"Very little at present, I must confess," answered Janet, with a wan smile. "The chief thing for which I care just now is to know that so long as I remain at Dupley Walls I shall be near you; and that of itself would be sufficient to enable me to rest contented under worse inflictions than Lady Pollexfen's ill temper."

"You ridiculous Janet! Ah! if I only dared

to tell you everything. But that must not be. Let us rather talk of what your duties will be in your new situation."

"Yes, tell me about them, please," said Janet, "and you shall see in time to come that your words have not been forgotten."

"To begin: you will have to go to her ladyship's room precisely at eight every morning. Sometimes she will not want you, in which case you will be at liberty till after breakfast. Should she want you it will probably be to read to her while she sips her chocolate, or it may be to play a game of backgammon with her before she gets up. A little later on you will be able to steal an hour or so for yourself, as while her ladyship is undergoing the elaborate processes of the toilette, your services will not be required. On coming down, if the weather be fine, she will want the support of your arm during her stroll on the terrace. If the weather be wet, she will probably attend to her correspondence and book-keeping, and you will have to fill the parts both of amanuensis and accountant. When Mr. Madgin, her ladyship's man of business, comes up

to Dupley Walls, you will have to be in attendance to take notes, write down instructions, and so on. By-and-by will come luncheon, of which, as a rule, you will partake with her. After luncheon you will be your own mistress for an hour while her ladyship sleeps. The moment she awakes you will have to be in attendance, either to play to her, or else to read to her—perhaps a little French or Italian, in both of which languages I hope that you are tolerably proficient. Your next duty will be to accompany her ladyship in her drive out. When you get back, will come dinner, but only when specially invited will you sit down with her ladyship. When that honour is not accorded you, you and I will dine here, darling, by our two selves."

"Then I hope her ladyship will not invite me oftener than once a month," cried impulsive Janet.

"The number of your invitations to dinner will depend upon the extent of her liking for you, so that we shall soon know whether or no you are a favourite. She may or may not require you after dinner. If she does require

you, it may be either for reading or music, or to play backgammon with her; or even to sit quietly with her without speaking, for the mere sake of companionship. One fact you will soon discover for yourself—that her ladyship does not like to be long alone. And now, dearest, I think I have told you enough for the present. We will talk further of these things to-morrow. Give me just one kiss, and then see what you can find to play among that heap of old music on the piano. Madame Duclos used to write in raptures of your style and touch. We will now prove whether her eulogy was well founded."

Janet found that she was not to occupy the same bedroom as on her first visit to Dupley Walls, but one nearer that of Sister Agnes. She was not sorry for this, for there had been a secret dread upon her of having to sleep in a room so near to that occupied by the body of Sir John Pollexfen. She had never forgotten her terrible experience in connexion with the Black Room, and she wished to keep herself entirely free from any such influences in time to come. The first

question she asked Dance when they reached her bedroom was :—

"Does Sister Agnes still visit the Black Room every midnight?"

"Yes, for sure," answered Dance. "There is no one but her to do it. Her ladyship would not allow any of the servants to enter the room. Rather than that, I believe she would herself do what has to be done there. Sister Agnes would not neglect that duty if she was dying."

Janet said no more, but then and there she made up her mind to a certain course of action, of which nothing would have made her believe herself capable only an hour before.

Early next forenoon she was summoned to an interview with Lady Pollexfen. Her heart beat more quickly than common as she was ushered by Dance into the old woman's dressing-room.

Her ladyship was in demie-toilette—made up in part for the day, but not yet finished. Her black wig, with its long corkscrew curls, was carefully adjusted; her rouge and powder were artistically laid on, her eyebrows elaborately pointed, and in so far she looked as she always

looked when visible to any one but her maid. But her figure wanted bracing up, so to speak, and looked shrunken and shrivelled in the old cashmere dressing-robe, from which at that early hour she had not emerged. Her fingers—long, lean, and yellow—were decorated with some half dozen valuable rings. Increasing years had not tended to make her hands steadier than Janet remembered them as being when she last saw her ladyship; and of late it had become a matter of some difficulty with her to keep her head quite still: it seemed possessed by an unaccountable desire to imitate the shaking of her hands. She was seated in an easy chair as Janet entered the room. Her breakfast equipage was on a small table at her elbow.

As the door closed behind Janet, she stood still and curtsied.

Lady Pollexfen placed her glass to her eye, and with a lean forefinger beckoned to Janet to draw near. Janet advanced, her eyes fixed steadily on those of Lady Pollexfen. A yard or two from the table she stopped and curtsied again.

"I hope that I have the happiness of finding your ladyship quite well," she said, in a low clear voice, in which there was not the slightest tremor or hesitation.

"And pray, Miss Holme, what can it matter to you whether I am well or ill? Answer me that if you please."

"I owe so much to your ladyship, I have been such a pensioner on your bounty ever since I can remember anything, that mere selfishness alone, if no higher motive be allowed me, must always prompt me to feel an interest in the state of your ladyship's health."

"Candid, at any rate. But I wish you clearly to understand that whatever obligation you may feel yourself under to me for what is past and gone, you have no claim of any kind upon me for the future. The tie between us can be severed by me at any moment."

"Seven years ago your ladyship impressed that fact so strongly on my mind that I have never forgotten it. I have never felt myself to be other than a dependent on your bounty."

"A very praiseworthy feeling, young lady, and

one which I trust you will continue to cherish. Not that I wish other people to look upon you as a dependent. I wish——." She broke off abruptly, and stared helplessly round the room. Suddenly her head began to shake. "Heaven help me! what do I wish?" she exclaimed; and with that she began to cry, and seemed all in a moment to have grown older by twenty years.

Janet, in her surprise, made a step or two forward, but Lady Pollexfen waved her fiercely back. "Fool! fool! why don't you go away?" she cried. "Why do you stare at me so? Go away, and send Dance to me. You have spoiled my complexion for the day."

Janet left the room and sent Dance to her mistress, and then went for a ramble in the grounds. The seal of desolation and decay was set upon everything. The garden, no longer the choice home of choice flowers, was weed-grown and neglected. The greenhouses were empty, and falling to pieces for lack of a few simple repairs. The shrubs and evergreens had all run wild for want of pruning, and in several places the dividing hedges were broken down, and through the

breaches sheep had intruded themselves into the private grounds. Even the house itself had a shabby out-at-elbows air, like a gentleman fallen upon evil days. Several of the upper windows were shuttered, some of the others showed a broken pane or two. Here and there a shutter had fallen away, or was hanging by a solitary hinge, suggesting thoughts of ghostly flappings to and fro in the rough wind on winter nights. Doors and window frames were blistering and splitting for want of paint. Close by the sacred terrace itself lay the fragments of a broken chimney-pot, blown down during the last equinoctial gales and suffered to lie where it had fallen. Everywhere were visible tokens of that miserly thrift which, carried to excess, degenerates into unthrift of the worst and meanest kind, from which the transition to absolute ruin is both easy and certain. For a full hour Janet trod the weed-grown walks with clasped hands and saddened eyes. At the end of that time Dance came in search of her. Lady Pollexfen wanted to see her again.

END OF VOL. I.

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA
3 0112 042052529